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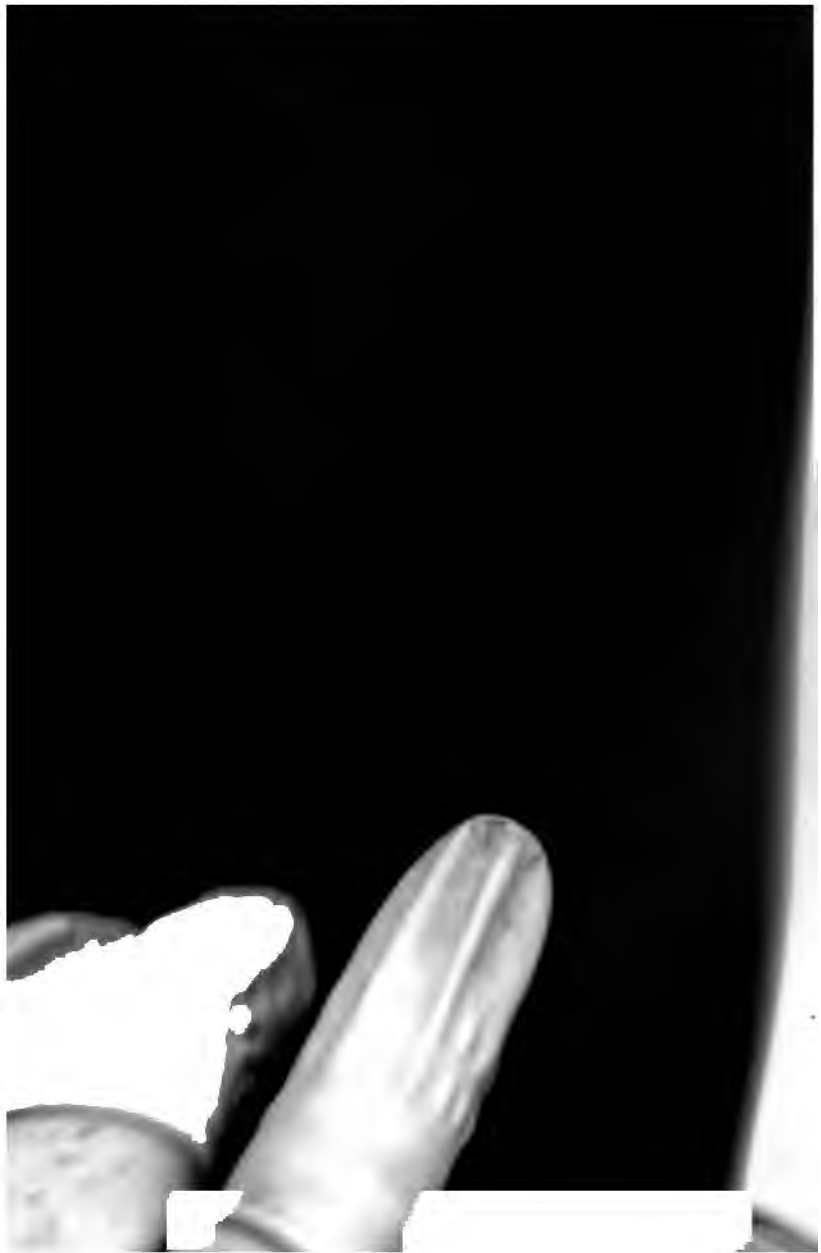
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THE HEIR EXPECTANT.

VOL. III.

THE HEIR EXPECTANT.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“RAYMOND’S HEROINE,”

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON :

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1870.

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250. x. 255.

LONDON :
PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL, BLENHEIM HOUSE.
BLENHEIM STREET, OXFORD STREET.

CONTENTS

OF

THE THIRD VOLUME.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. VICE JOHN THWAITES RETIRED	1
II. A THUNDERBOLT	26
III. MRS. WATERS FINDS OUT	40
IV. THE NEWS TOLD AT THE LAURELS	49
V. SUSPENSE	68
VI. WORSE AND WORSE	91
VII. MRS. WATERS TAKES A RESOLUTION	116
VIII. RANDAL SCORES A POINT	140
IX. ILLUMINATION	163
X. THE WIFE'S STORY	172
XI. HUSBAND AND WIFE	192
XII. ON THE TRACK	210
XIII. FOUND	233
XIV. FATHER AND DAUGHTER	257
XV. AT DEAD OF NIGHT	278
XVI. DAYLIGHT LET IN	298
XVII. THE LAST OF UNCLE GILBERT'S MONEY	322

THE HEIR EXPECTANT.

CHAPTER I.

Vice John Thwaites Retired.

THE next morning, as the family at the Laurels—all feeling rather tired and fagged with last night's dissipation—were sitting at an unusually late breakfast, a servant entered to hand Emmy a small paper bag with something pinned inside. Emmy quite started as it was laid before her—could it be——But surely all that nonsense was forgotten by this time.

“A boy has just left this for you, miss. He says somebody picked it up a few days ago where you had been, and thinks it must belong to you.”

“What can it be?” said Emmy faintly, then, seeing that her father and mother were both

looking on in some curiosity, she unpinned the bag and shook out the contents.

A knot of violet ribbon fell on her plate. She had half expected as much, and yet was so startled at the sight that she had not breath to say a word.

"Why, that is some mistake, I think," said Mrs. Waters. "It is not yours, Emmy, is it?"

"I—I believe it is, mamma," answered Emmy rather huskily. "My black grenadine, you know; I have been missing one of the bows for some time. Oh yes! it is all right, Thomas."

"They must be very conscientious people who trouble themselves about such a trifle," remarked Mrs. Waters, laughing. "Give the boy sixpence for himself; I suppose that is what he really came for."

"He went away directly, ma'am. I had not even time to ask who sent him."

"Indeed! Oh! very well, that will do. Really it is exceedingly odd," went on Mrs. Waters as the man withdrew. "The idea of anybody thinking it worth while to send a thing like that!"

"I am very glad they did think it worth

while, that's all," said Emmy energetically. "The dress has been quite spoilt without it, and I am so pleased to have it back again, so pleased."

She thrust the ribbon into her pocket as she spoke, vowing to herself that she was not only pleased, but delighted. And yet, her delight notwithstanding, she had no sooner got it out of sight than she crushed it up in her palm as though she hated it.

The subject dropped, out of the conversation at least, for it was as prominent as ever in Emmy's mind. During the whole of breakfast-time she hardly knew what was said to her, hardly knew what she said herself, was scarcely indeed conscious of anything save of that ribbon lying crumpled up in her pocket, that despised, rejected, ignominiously cast away ribbon.

At last to her great relief the meal was over, and she was set free from the restraints of observation. Her father according to his wont went out to look after the works at Beacon Bay; and her mother, tired with the exertions of the previous evening, withdrew to her own

room to rest, so that Emmy was left with the whole morning before her to give way as she chose to sweet or bitter reflection.

She was no sooner alone than she hurried to her room and locked herself in, then, taking the crushed ribbon from her pocket, sat down with a pair of scissors, and snipped it first in one direction and next in another, till its identity as a ribbon was quite destroyed. Then she pushed the fragments from her, and sat for a long time looking at them through a hot mist that gradually grew thicker and thicker before her eyes. So he had flung back her gift in her face, that gift which she had plotted so ingeniously to let him have, that gift which he had sworn on receiving it to keep and cherish while life was left to him! Ah! what a pleasant evening that had seemed, but how hateful it had really been! what an evening of folly and degradation! To think how far she had abased herself to please him, actually to the point of letting him carry away something that had been hers! and with what result!—to be insulted by having her token returned with scorn. Ah! there were others who would not

have used her so—there were others, she was quite sure, to whom the merest trifle that had belonged to her would be precious—others a great deal better born and better gentlemen altogether than John Thwaites. But he had chosen not to cumber himself with the smallest relic of her, he had chosen to cast it forth as something worthless and odious, and she was glad of it, very glad. For now everything between them was at an end—definitively and for ever at an end—with no more possibility of being renewed than there was possibility of piecing together that poor slighted ribbon into what it had been when he had taken it from her dress the evening of the charade.

All at once she discovered that scalding tears were running down her cheeks, and filling her eyes so that she could not see for them. Actually she was crying! She sprang from her chair in a paroxysm of shame and anger, tossed the hated shreds far away from her, and rushed to bathe her face in a basin of cold water. Then, because her eyes still felt hot and inflamed, she went to her window, and flinging it open stood with her face turned towards the fresh keen

breeze of the December day. She was determined in one way or other to efface every outward sign of her weakness.

The prospect without was very pleasant. The day was bright and sunny, and the view over fields and woods and villages and distant hills was almost as smiling as in summer, with the additional advantage of a wintry clearness and distinctness of outline. Everything looked so cheerful and inviting, and the sharp crisp air blew so refreshingly on her cheek, that Emmy began to think that what would do her more good than anything else would be a nice long smart walk. She had not been much in the habit of going out by herself since the change in her fortunes, but for that very reason the idea was now all the more tempting. Yes, she would go and have a good walk, unhampered by carriage or footman or other such encumbrance ; nothing like fresh air and exercise when one was a little over-fatigued.

She speedily got herself arrayed in her walking costume, and, having consulted her mirror to make sure that her eyes were not perceptibly red, sallied out of the room and the house. She

felt wonderfully invigorated as soon as she was in the open air, and, turning into an unfrequented lane near the house, went posting along the rough road with as much briskness and energy in her little feet as though each separate stone or twig that they trampled on had been a John Thwaites.

In this determined mood she got over a great deal of ground almost without knowing it, and with hardly any sense of fatigue. At last, on emerging from a network of solitary lanes and field-paths into a part of the high road about two miles from her home, she came to a halt, and stood for a minute to rest and look about her before turning to retrace her steps. She found herself surprisingly strengthened both in body and mind, and quite enjoyed the beautiful view which at that point was obtainable of Chorcombe and the surrounding neighbourhood.

But the walk, though it had done her good in helping her to shake off importunate reflections, had not entirely cured her. She had scarcely begun to admire the view when she caught herself contemplating with special attention an un-

sightly tall chimney a little way out of the village, which had nothing in the world about it to make it interesting save that it belonged to the establishment where John Thwaites was head clerk. And even when she thus caught herself, she continued to contemplate it still, not of course from any feeling of tenderness or sentimentality, but simply because she could not take her eyes off it.

How abominably he had used her, how rudely, how ungratefully ! But it was all over now—over now and evermore, and a good thing too. The loss was not hers, at all events ; she was not troubling her head about him, goodness knew, but very likely he, sitting yonder in his counting-house——

She started, and looked round. She was standing within a few feet of a bend in the road, and had caught a side-glimpse through the leafless branches of the hedge of somebody coming round the corner in her direction. And such is the power which the association of ideas may have over the imagination that for a moment she expected to see——But no, now that she looked she saw that it was somebody on horse-

back, and she grew calm again at once. What could have put so ridiculous an idea into her head?

But hardly had she recovered her composure when it was once more upset. The horseman emerged from behind the hedge so that his whole figure became visible, and Emmy, unconcernedly contemplating him as he rode towards her, suddenly recognised—Mr. Randal Egerton!

She stood rooted to the spot, quite dumbfounded by surprise, and had not even presence of mind enough to look another way. Yes, it was really he, her pleasant partner and devoted servitor of the past night—he to whom indeed she had owed all the pleasure of the evening. How well he looked on horseback—the very image of a gallant cavalier and high-born gentleman, as in truth he was. Ah! what a thing it was to be a real gentleman! not like some——

“Miss Waters!” he exclaimed, reining up abruptly, and looking almost as much surprised as she had been herself.

She smiled faintly, unable to devise any other mode of greeting. She was thinking of what

John Thwaites would say if he could see her standing to receive the homage of this brilliant equestrian.

He sprang lightly down from his steed, and holding his bridle with one hand advanced towards her, extending the other.

"I hardly could believe it was you at first, Miss Waters, though indeed I might have known that no one else——But who would have thought of seeing you here, so far from home, and after parting from you so late this morning? I was afraid you would have been so much tired—I was just riding over to inquire."

"You are very kind," murmured Emmy, and her heart gave a little bound at this proof of tender interest. There was one person in the world who cared for her, then! "You are very kind. Yes, I was a little tired, and that was the reason I came out; I thought the fresh air would do me good."

"I need hardly ask if it has had the desired effect."

"Oh yes! I am quite well again now," she answered, looking down shyly.

“And Mr. and Mrs. Waters—they are well too, I hope?”

“Yes, thank you—at least papa is quite well and has gone over to Beacon Bay, but mamma has got a headache rather.”

“Do you think I should be intruding very much if I were to call this morning to pay her my respects?”

“Oh! I am sure she will be very happy to see you.”

“Then you will allow me the pleasure of escorting you?”

She blushed and muttered something, she knew not what. Randal turned and gave his bridle to his servant, who had just then ridden up, and who forthwith went forward with the two horses, observing as discreet a distance from his master and the young lady as he had done on a former occasion when his services were put into similar requisition. Emmy, who of course did not know anything about that former occasion (but indeed perhaps it would have been all the same if she had), felt a thrill of mingled nervousness and exultation. That Mr. Randal Egerton of Clare Court should actually send

away his horse for the pleasure of going home with her on foot—ah! if John Thwaites could but see!

“The road is very rough,” he remarked when they had gone a few paces in silence. “You had better take my arm.”

She hesitated a little, then very timidly accepted the proffered aid. The road was really very rough indeed, though she had never particularly noticed it before. As she put her arm within his, and recognised the slight pressure—slight but yet very palpable—with which it was welcomed there, she trembled and felt that at last she had found her destiny. Yes, there could be no longer any doubt, and a very brilliant destiny it was. To be transplanted at once into the highest circles in the county, to be presented at Court, to preside at fashionable gatherings where such people as clerks would never dare to set foot, to be adored and idolised by one whom birth and breeding alike qualified to appreciate her—what better could she wish for?

“What a charming evening we had last night!” he began when he had thus taken possession of her.

"I am very glad you liked it, Mr. Egerton."


"Liked it! I never enjoyed anything so much in my life. Except this morning, and I am enjoying this morning more still. You see I am of a selfish disposition, and last night there were too many to share my happiness to admit of its being quite perfect."

"Oh!" lisped Emmy deprecatingly.

She was so nervous that it was all she could utter. What was he going to say next? The crisis was certainly close at hand.

For a little time, however, he did not say anything, and she could not refrain from glancing furtively upwards just to see what he was about. Perhaps he was considering how he should best go on, for his eyes were resting with rather a thoughtful and perplexed expression, not on her, but on a certain dark stretch of woodland a little way from Chorcombe.

"How well Egerton Park looks from here!" said Emmy, following the direction of his eyes. She was almost glad to find something that should obtain her breathing-time, were it only for a moment, and she did not think it could be for much longer.



"Very well indeed." He paused, and again she thought the crisis was coming. But again it was put off a little longer, for after a brief consideration he went on to observe:

"Poor Olivia! it is quite delightful to see what spirits she is in. Mr. Graham is expected back in the course of a day or two, I believe."

"I believe he is."

"If only I could be certain he is everything that she seems to think! What is your opinion, Miss Waters? is he a man really calculated to make her happy?"

"I dare say he may be," said Emmy, wincing a good deal at the question. "That is—oh yes! she will be very happy, I have no doubt."

"You have no reason for thinking otherwise?" he asked, turning his dark eyes earnestly upon her.

"No reason!" she faltered, for she felt she was committing a kind of treason in deceiving him when he asked her with such a look as that. "Oh dear no! no reason, of course."

"Miss Waters," and the earnestness of his look became blended with a shade of tender re-

proach, "you are not dealing fairly with me. You know something against that man, and you are keeping it back."

"Something against him!" stammered Emmy.

"Yes, I am sure of it. Oh! Miss Waters, I implore you to be frank with me—if not for the sake of my cousin's happiness, for the sake of the honour of my family, of my own honour, that is. What! you know something on which my honour depends, and you will not tell me?"

"What should I know?" said Emmy feebly. "You cannot expect me to know more of him than mamma, and she has told you that he was quite respectable."

"And for that far be it from me to blame her. Such questions as I put to your mother that day—impertinent questions if you will—she had a perfect right to answer as she pleased; my honour and the honour of my family are nothing to her—not yet at least. But from *you*—ah! from *you*——"

He pressed her arm again, and gazed into her face with such profound tenderness that Emmy could not but feel that already they were as one. Ah! if John Thwaites could only know!

"If *you* tell me there is nothing against him, I will be content," he said, gazing at her still.

She could not have told him so for the world; she would have despised herself for such an abuse of his chivalrous confidence. And yet if she did not tell him so, was not all concealment virtually at an end? What should she do? Ah! what but throw herself at once on his generosity and his love?

"He did something wrong once, when he was quite a young man. But that was a great, great many years ago."

"Something wrong—and what was it?" demanded Randal.

He spoke so eagerly that she was quite frightened to think what she had done.

"Ah! you will never tell anybody, will you?" she cried in terror. "It was so many years ago, and he is so sorry for it now—and indeed I am sure he will make Miss Egerton very happy. He is so fond of her, and he is very, very good, I do assure you he is—and poor mamma——Oh! promise, promise you will never tell!"

And as she thought of her mother, and the solemn pledge of secrecy exacted from her, she

was almost ready to fall to the ground. But in the same moment she was conscious of an arm gently creeping about her waist—a strong manly arm with a wonderful power of support in it.

“Can you not trust me?” he said in his most expressively vibrating tones.

She felt astonishingly comforted and reassured, and quite clung to him as she answered:

“Oh yes! I am sure I can, you never could be so cruel. It would do no good to tell, you know—only make everybody miserable. And poor dear mamma—it would break her heart. Ah! for dear mamma’s sake, you won’t tell, will you?”

His only reply was to draw her closer to him yet, and she felt that the reply was sufficient.

“But what makes your mother take so much interest in him?” he demanded caressingly.

She was quite startled to find how far she had betrayed herself, and hesitated a while before answering. But how could she keep anything back from him now? Indeed was not all that she might say to him only a kind of self-communing?

"Can you not guess?" she said, hanging her head. "Did you never think that perhaps Graham was not his real name?"

A ray of light flickered across Randal's mind—a vague recollection of having heard something of some disgrace connected with a brother of Mrs. Waters.

"Your mother's brother?" he whispered in a voice quite trembling with the excitement of the discovery.

"Ah! but don't tell anybody, for Heaven's sake," she cried beseechingly. "Poor mamma, she made me promise so——"

"What was it exactly that he did—forged or embezzled—something of the kind, I know. What was it?"

"He wrote Uncle Gilbert's name on something or other—I hardly understand what it was," murmured Emmy, writhing under the inquisition, yet entirely unable to resist it. "But it was for a very small sum, only a hundred pounds, I think, and it is so long ago now, and of course Uncle Gilbert was not exactly like a stranger——"

"What is his real name? Not Graham, then?"

"Maxwell—Harold Maxwell—did you not know? Oh! I am afraid it is very wicked of me to tell you, but I would not have told anybody else for the world."

She looked at him imploringly, but he did not answer, apparently wholly absorbed in meditation on what he had just heard. So much absorbed was he that he seemed to forget the need she had for support, and, gradually loosening the clasp of his arm round her waist, withdrew it presently altogether.

"You will not betray me!" she exclaimed, seized with sudden anxiety. "Oh! if you do, if you do, what will become of me? Mamma will die, and I shall go mad. Ah! you know you said I might trust you, you know——"

The violence of her emotion roused him at last, and, looking round with the air of one reminded of something that has been forgotten, he asked in a voice of gentle reproof:

"How can you doubt me?"

The words might be in themselves rather conventional and commonplace, but coming from his lips they were enough for Emmy. Ah! indeed how could she doubt him, how for an in-

stant suspect that he to whom she was henceforth to be all in all would take such cruel, such treacherous advantage of her first confidence?

"It is very foolish of me," she said apologetically. "For of course I know that telling you is not like telling anybody else, of course I know that you——"

She stopped, almost dismayed to find what an opportunity she was giving him for declaring all his feelings towards her. The declaration would come, of course, had indeed as good as come already, but she could not bear to have it thought that she was inviting it, and kept silence in half terrified expectation of the use which he would make of her admission. But he said nothing, and she gradually recovered from her apprehension.

They walked on some little time without saying anything, until at last they came in sight of the servant waiting with the horses at a corner of the road within a stone's throw of the gate of the Laurels. Then Randal spoke—ah! how the sound of his voice made Emmy tremble as she thought of what he might be about to say!

"How provokingly short the days are now ! Actually it will be as much as I can do to get home by daylight."

If Emmy had calculated, she might have been rather surprised at this assertion, for it was still more than an hour from sunset, and Clare Court was scarcely ten miles distant. But then Randal had a little commission to execute on the way, of which Emmy knew nothing.

"Mr. Waters is out, you say ?" he resumed after rather an awkward pause, for Emmy had been so much taken by surprise that she had made no remark. "And I do not like to disturb Mrs. Waters when she is so tired. Altogether I think I will not intrude just now."

Emmy could answer nothing. What ! was he going to leave her—leave her without—

"It is better I should put off a little for the chance of seeing Mr. Waters," he said, perhaps noticing her blank look. "And you may be sure I will not put off long."

He accompanied the assurance with one of those glances of which she had already caught so many—this one, as she thought, more full of meaning than any that had gone before. Her

heart beat lightly, as though a load had been lifted off it. Ah! how could she have so misunderstood him? He wanted to wait until he could see her father and make formal application for her hand.

"Good-bye then, Mr. Egerton," she said, blushing.

"Good-bye, Miss Waters. Ah! if you knew what an effort it costs me to tear myself away!"

He put out his hand, and she let hers rest in it while she timidly looked up with a parting appeal:

"You will not tell? you will not break mamma's heart—and mine?"

"Is there not something which ought to cast out fear?" he answered, and gave her hand a long tender pressure.

There was not time to say more, as the servant, who had been already beckoned, was now close beside them. In another moment Randal was in the saddle, waving his hand by way of final adieu while his impatient horse made a rapid start forward.

But enough had been said to satisfy Emmy. As she looked after him with that farewell

pressure still warm on her hand, and those farewell words still ringing in her ear, she felt strong enough in her perfect love to cast out fear a hundred times over. Yes, of course she could trust him, trust him even as herself—was he not part of herself now? How strange it was to think of—the heir of the Clare Court Egertons—so highly born and aristocratically connected—so handsome too, and of such a gallant bearing—ah! how noble he looked riding down the road yonder on that curvetting steed which he managed so gracefully! Very different from John Thwaites indeed! Well, perhaps John Thwaites would be sorry when he heard.

She roused herself and moved forward to the gate, in a much happier frame of mind than when she last passed through it. Just as she was about to enter, however, it was opened from the inside, and to her great surprise her mother, ready equipped for walking, appeared on the threshold.

“What! mamma, you are going out to-day! I thought you were too tired.”

“So I was, but I have just heard something

that has made me quite well again ;” and indeed Emmy, looking more particularly, was quite struck with the unwontedly bright expression of her mother’s face. “I have just had news from——” here Mrs. Waters dropped her voice and gave a jealous glance round—“you know who, Emmy dear.”

Emmy did know directly, and felt a very disagreeable sinking at her heart in consequence.

“Indeed! He is back in England then?”

“Yes, in Chorcombe. I have had a letter from the inn to say he was just setting out for Egerton Park, and would call here on his way back. And I am going now to see if I can meet him ; your papa may bring home Mr. Tovey or somebody to dinner, and I want to see him first alone. Dear Emmy, I am so glad !”

“Dear mamma! yes, I quite understand you should be pleased.”

“You will be very careful, darling, will you not? but I am sure I need say nothing about that. You have never broken a promise to your mother yet, and I am sure you never will.”

“Oh! of course I will be careful,” stammered

Emmy, passing her mother rather quickly on her way to the house. "I—I think I will go in now; it is very cold."

She went in accordingly, but she did not re-enter nearly so well satisfied with herself as she had been just before. On the contrary, her conscience smote her very heavily. She was sorry that she had not remembered how very soon her uncle might return, sorry that she had not thought more of her promise to her mother, sorry almost that she had met Randal that day at all. Oh! if any harm should come of what she had said, if——

Ah! but no harm would come, no harm could come. Had he not told her to trust him? had he not told her to cast out fear? and did he not love her far too well to break his word? How then could she doubt him? Why, even her mother, if her mother could know all, would understand that there was no danger.

CHAPTER II.

A Thunderbolt.

“ I WONDER what I have done that I should be so happy.”

The words were spoken by Olivia, as, with her hand locked in that of her betrothed, she sat in the same room where she had parted from him last, now made bright by the level rays of the winter sunset, and brighter still by the presence of fulfilled hope and entire content. Her lover had returned, never to part from her again, and she felt as though she had nothing more left to wish for.

He smiled into her eyes with a look of unutterable fondness.

“And what have I done, Olivia ? That is a great deal more puzzling. For I do not believe it is in the power of any mortal creature to deserve

a tithe of the gladness that is mine to-day."

"Ah! but you deserve it all, and a hundred times more. You need never expect to get your deserts, for there is nothing and nobody in the world good enough for you."

"Little one, little one," he said, stroking her hand caressingly, "why will you not flatter a trifle more soberly, so that I may have the pleasure of trying to believe you really mean it?"

"But I am not flattering," she protested. "I am only saying what is true—what is true to me at least. You are not perfect, I suppose, because nobody can be perfect, but to me I confess—I wonder if you ever did anything wrong? I certainly cannot imagine it."

"You cannot?" and this time with the caressing tenderness of his manner was mingled something of earnestness. "My own darling! Well, perhaps you may be right in thinking I would not wish to do anything outrageously wicked," he added laughing.

"Oh! wicked, I didn't mean that, but I wonder if you have ever done anything weak or foolish? I suppose you have, of course you have, but somehow I can't realize the fact. Do

you ever make mistakes, Harry? Tell me."

A strange look came over his face—so strange that Olivia would have been afraid that she had said something to vex him, only that she could not imagine him vexed by such a trifle.

"Mistakes! oh yes! grand mistakes sometimes. And as for never doing anything weak or foolish, I often wonder whether there is any one in the world who can match me at it."

"Now don't look so serious, Harry, or I shall be thinking you mean something personal. Perhaps you consider it weak and foolish to have anything to do with me—is that what you want to imply?"

But he did not repel the imputation nearly so emphatically as she had expected.

"My dearest love! Well, who knows? if I had been stronger and wiser I should not have been so selfish. For I have been very selfish with you, Olivia—more selfish than I could have believed of myself before I was tempted."

"Selfish in not running away from me when you discovered that you were not to have the pleasure of rescuing me from absolute pauperism! I do call you selfish now, Harry, and cruel

and unkind into the bargain. You see that you have made me happy—oh! so happy—and then you go regretting it. But it is too late to regret it now—you cannot take my happiness away, neither you nor any one else.”

“God grant indeed it never may be taken away, my treasure!”

“It never can be taken away, Harry; you may think me presumptuous to say so, but it never can, no, not even by death itself. Death might put an end to it, but could not take it away, could not annul the past, could not turn that which has been into that which has not been. And there has been happiness for me, Harry—yes, thanks to you, there has been happiness for me.”

As she spoke she raised her dark eyes to his face with an expression which made him forget everything else. He looked down at her in turn, and a glance was exchanged between them which, while it lasted, seemed to admit each into the inmost recesses of the other's soul.

Just then a gentle tap sounded at the door—a tap which, gentle as it was, effectually recalled Olivia to a consciousness of the outer world,

and made her draw her hand very hastily from that of her lover as, with an unwonted sense of flurry and embarrassment, she responded :

“Come in.”

A servant entered with a letter.

“If you please, ma’am, Mr. Randal Egerton wished me to give you this immediately.”

“Mr. Randal Egerton ! He has been calling, then ?” said Olivia, but she asked the question as much by way of concealing her own confusion as because she cared for an answer.

“Yes, ma’am. I told him I thought you were engaged, and he said he would not give you the trouble of seeing him, but would write a note in the library. He told me I was to give it you directly he went away.”

“Oh indeed !” said Olivia. “Thank you, that will do.”

She took the letter, and was in the act of slipping it away into her pocket when the man, perhaps noticing that she was disposed to treat it rather negligently, turned round as he reached the door to add :

“Mr. Egerton said it was very important, if you please, ma’am.”

"Had you not better open it at once?" suggested Mr. Graham as the servant withdrew.

"Perhaps I had," said Olivia, and mechanically broke the seal—very mechanically, for she did not feel capable just now of interesting herself in any the most important subject on which Randal might have to consult her. "It is from my cousin Randal—one of those cousins I once told you about, you know."

And thus saying she let her glance rest languidly on the lines before her, feeling however for the first few moments almost under a physical inability to give them the attention necessary for their comprehension.

Suddenly two or three words, becoming as it were detached from the rest, caught her eye; and though it could hardly be said that they bore with them to her understanding any definite meaning, she felt as she read them a great rush of blood to her heart which nearly took away her senses. But stunned and half stupefied as she was, she still kept her gaze riveted on the letter. She was almost as incapable as at first of studying it with anything like clearness of apprehension; but the sight of those

two or three words had already made this difference in her, that for the time she had no faculty of attention left for anything save what might be set down on that paper.

What was set down there ran as follows :—

MY DEAR OLIVIA,

How much it grieves me to write as I am about to write just now you will perhaps never understand, as I have too much reason to believe that you are either wholly unable or wholly unwilling to appreciate the depth of the regard which I have always felt towards you. But that very regard makes it imperative on me to pursue a course so painful that with one I cared for less I know not if I should have courage to adopt it. Olivia, my dear cousin, call up all the native vigour of your character to enable you to hear the worst, and not to hate me for telling it. I have just learned on indisputable authority—authority which if necessary I am prepared to produce—that the man on whom you have lavished your generous affections, the man who, as I hear, is even now presumptuously intruding himself on your presence, is or has been a fugitive from justice under an assumed name. The real name of the person you have known as Graham is Harold Maxwell. He is the brother of Mrs. Waters, and some years ago forged the name of old Gilbert Waters on a cheque or other such document. If you doubt what I say, I shall be able to bring proofs and witnesses to substantiate it, but the best proof will probably be the demeanour of the wretched man himself, on being confronted with this accusation. Dear Olivia, forgive me

that I have been obliged to write thus much, and believe me, now and ever,

Your affectionate

RANDAL EGERTON.

Need I add that you may rely on my honour (knowing your feelings towards me as I do, I dare not use a warmer word) to preserve everything which I have now told you inviolably locked in my own breast? Whatever rumours I may hereafter hear as to the reasons of any change which this communication may make in your movements, be sure that the dreadful truth will never be divulged by me.

As Olivia's eyes travelled over these lines, she could not properly be described as understanding them, for her power of understanding, and indeed of all conscious thought whatever, was for the time in nearly complete abeyance. But, little able as she would have been to render any account of what had happened, her heart was beating all the time as if it would burst, while through her memory there passed unbidden a strange series of vague images and recollections which, all bearing on the subject of the letter, showed that her mind was actively at work, though involuntarily and almost unconsciously, as that of a dreamer. A hundred little incidents of her first acquaintance with

her lover—the excitement of Mrs. Waters's manner on the announcement of his coming, the tête-à-tête walk on the beach next morning, the unexpected effusiveness of congratulation with which the news of the engagement had been received, and so on in almost infinite succession—incidents which at the time had passed almost unnoticed—crowded back upon her now, and, though she hardly knew what had suggested them, weighed on her brain with a pressure that was almost maddening. Then, equally unbidden, there rose up in her mind a dim recollection of having heard from somebody soon after her first arrival in the neighbourhood of a forgery committed long ago by a relation of Mrs. Waters, and of having treated the information with contempt as a paltry endeavour to shake her estimation of her friends for a fault not their own. She did not understand, or try to understand, what made the information treated so lightly then of such terrible personal import to her now, but nevertheless the mere vague memory of that piece of idle or ill-natured gossip seemed to send a death-chill through all her veins.

"Olivia, what is the matter?" she heard an anxious voice say at last.

It was her lover's voice, and its sound recalled her to herself at once. She knew now of what he was accused, of what she had during those few dreadful moments half suspected him, and an impulse shot through her of indomitable love and pride and tenderness. What a wretch had she been to let her trust for one tenth of a second waver!

"Nothing is the matter," she said, looking up with clear calm eyes into which the light had returned as if by magic. "A lying letter, hardly worth the pains of reading or contradicting. I show it you because I wish to show you all my letters now."

With steady hand she gave him the letter, and then looked away while he read it—she scorned to seem as though she were watching its effect.

She kept her eyes averted for nearly a minute, during which there was no sound save a rustling of paper, then, wondering at the silence, she looked round.

He was sitting with drooping head and part-

ed lips almost ashy in their paleness, gazing with vacant eyes at the letter, which had fluttered out of his trembling fingers to the floor. As Olivia saw, a freezing fear fell upon her.

"It is not true?" she articulated, but her throat was so dry that she had to repeat the words before they were audible. "It is not true"—Harry, she was about to add, but something rose up and would not let the name pass her lips.

He did not answer, but his head drooped lower on his chest, and his hands clenched themselves convulsively.

"Why do you not speak?" she demanded passionately.

He raised his head slightly, and answered in low suppressed accents:

"Because I have nothing to say."

"Nothing to say! It is true then that you——"

"It is true that I am Harold Maxwell—yes."

Olivia sat as one on whom a thunderbolt has fallen. A kind of darkness seemed to descend on her spirit which for a time took away, not

consciousness exactly, but thought and motion and feeling itself—it was as if the whole world were coming to an end. Presently this cloud lifted itself off, and, with a painful spasm about the muscles of her throat that threatened to suffocate her, she returned to something like a sense of what had happened—of her wasted and worse than wasted love, of her boasted happiness annihilated, and not only annihilated, but turned to bitter shame and lasting degradation. Ah! as she realised it all, she sprang to her feet as though she had been stung.

“Begone from my house this instant! Your presence here is contamination—would be contamination in any honest dwelling. Do you hear me? go—or if it is possible that I should scorn and abhor you more than I do already——”

“Olivia!” he cried, starting up. He made a step towards her, so impetuously that she thought he was about to break into vehement denial, or even to catch her in his arms. But immediately afterwards the flush which had all at once risen to his cheek died away, his head slowly drooped anew upon his chest, and he

stood pale and motionless before her in the attitude of one who can make no defence.

"You have the right to speak to me as you will, Miss Egerton," he said in a stifled voice. "It was a crime in me to aspire to your hand under any circumstances, but certainly when I discovered that you were rich——"

"Discovered!" echoed Olivia contemptuously. Ah! the poor fool that she had been ever to believe in that transparent mockery, through which her cousin Randal had seen so easily, through which any one must have seen who was not infatuated like herself! And to think of the melodramatic little scene she had been at the pains of getting up in order to increase the surprise of the disclosure! Oh! fool! fool!

"What do you mean?" he said hoarsely. "You do not believe——"

"I do not," said Olivia with a curling lip. "What I do believe is that there was a plot to secure my property, from which my good fortune, and not my good sense, has preserved me."

A red spot started to his forehead, and a visible tremor ran through his whole frame; then,

drawing himself up to his full height, he smiled bitterly and answered :

“If you believe that, I have nothing more to say.”

“There is nothing more that can be said. Go—this is my house, and you are not welcome in it.”

Again he trembled, then, glancing up quickly, appeared about to speak. But if he had any such intention, he abandoned it almost as soon as formed, and, once more lowering his eyes, moved towards the door without a word. Olivia thought she saw him stagger as he went, but then Olivia's own brain was reeling so that the very ground seemed to heave beneath her.

The door opened, the door closed, footsteps sounded in the hall, then on the gravel without, and she knew that she was alone—alone with her misery and her degradation. And no sooner did she know it than, with an abrupt relaxation of the energy of indignation which had upheld her hitherto, she sank back into her chair, conscious of nothing but that she had endured till she could endure no more.

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CHAPTER III.

Mrs. Waters Finds Out.

MEANTIME Mrs. Waters, closely muffled in veil and shawl, was slowly pacing up and down a solitary strip of highway near one of the gates of Egerton Park, being the most unfrequented part of the road leading thence to the Laurels. As she had told Emmy, she wished to see her brother alone (at Nidbourne Emmy's vigilance had made it difficult for her to exchange with him in private more than a few words at a time), and she felt that she would be able to speak to him with less danger of interruption out of doors than in her own house. Then she had an important fact to communicate to him—the unavoidable admission of Emmy into the secret of his identity—a fact which might be necessary to explain any change observable in the girl's manner towards him,

and which Mrs. Waters consequently wished him to know if possible beforehand.

She had waited thus some time, and began to fear that she would after all not find the desired opportunity that day, for the shades of the winter evening were already rapidly falling, and she understood that the interview between the newly re-united lovers could hardly fail to be a long one. At last, just as she was getting tired of waiting, and was about resigning herself to return home with the object of her walk unfulfilled, she saw the figure of a man coming down the road from the direction of Egerton Park. He was still at some distance, but in a moment she knew her brother's gait, and went forward with quickened pace to meet him. Apparently he must have recognised her too, for as she drew nearer she saw him advancing with long eager strides which showed him to have some reason for making great haste.

But no, he had not seen her—he did not see her even when, throwing back her veil, she went up with extended hand to greet him—but hastened onwards without even turning his head in her direction.

"Why, Harry!" she said, seeing that he was about to pass her without recognition.

He started, and coming to an abrupt halt looked round, but with a perplexed air which showed that even now he did not very clearly know who had called him.

"Harry!" she said again, then, suddenly struck by a certain haggard vacant look about him which in the gathering obscurity she had not yet noticed, she added anxiously: "What is the matter? are you ill? Oh! Harry, you know me, surely?"

"Agnes! Oh yes! I know you. But why have you stopped me?"

"You are ill!" she cried, laying her hand on his arm with an impulse of terrified affection.

"Ill—I don't know—perhaps; I am not very well. But I must go on now."

"Go on! What do you want to do? Where are you going?"

"I don't know—somewhere—I will write to you."

"Harry! stop!" she cried imploringly, for he had disengaged himself from her as he spoke.

"What is it? what has happened? what——"

"I will write," he repeated.

And with a wave of his hand he was once more striding forward on his way.

She made a few uncertain steps after him, but he was already far beyond her reach, and presently had disappeared from view altogether behind a corner of the road.

The poor lady was ready to faint with agitation and alarm. What was the matter? Was he mad? The wildness of his words, of his gestures, of his whole manner almost seemed to suggest it. Or was it possible that any external cause——He had just come from Egerton House; could it be that something had happened there? Olivia was ill perhaps, or dead, or had proved fickle, or possibly——He could not have told Olivia anything, surely! Oh! what could it all be? And how was it possible to wait without knowing, or without going mad herself with the uncertainty?

She looked round with an instinctive seeking for help out of an agony of suspense which she felt to be unendurable. There, hardly further off than her brother had been when first she saw him, were the grey walls and overhanging trees of Egerton Park—the place whence he

had come in such wild excitement, the place where certainly something must be known by some one as to the cause of that excitement. Why then, that was the place for her to have her doubts set at rest! And no sooner had the idea occurred to her than she hastened blindly forward, with no thought of the difficulty of knowing how to frame and to whom to address her inquiries, with no thought of anything save her brother's pale face and choking disjointed words.

With that face and those words haunting her memory and ringing in her ears, she reached the gate of Egerton Park, and made her way up the avenue. Presently she found herself at the door of the house waiting for admission, and for the first time realized the necessity of not allowing her emotion to betray her.

"Can I see Miss Egerton?" she asked as calmly as she could of the servant who answered her summons.

"Yes, ma'am; will you please to walk this way? Miss Egerton is quite alone," said the man, who had happened to see Mr. Graham leave the house, and knew that this was a visitor

whom his mistress always made welcome.

With faltering steps she followed him to the well-known door of Olivia's favourite sitting-room, which he flung open, announcing :

"Mrs. Waters."

There was a quick rustle of drapery as of some one making a sudden change of position. It was nearly dark by this time, but from that sound and a transient glimpse she had caught as the door was opened, the visitor could almost have believed that Olivia had been sitting with her face buried in her hands. But, however that may have been, Olivia was sitting erect enough now.

Mrs. Waters was fully alive at length to the difficulty of her task. How was she to set about her interrogations, at the same time concealing the depth of the personal interest which prompted them ? But she was there, and it was necessary to say something—the more necessary as Olivia, apparently failing to recognise her in that uncertain light, had merely turned her face towards the door inquiringly, without making any attempt at welcome.

"Miss Egerton !" began Mrs. Waters, as soon

as the servant had withdrawn, and she made a hesitating step forward.

Olivia started up from her chair; it was evident that if she had previously had any doubt as to who the visitor might be, she had none now.

“*You!*” she exclaimed.

In that one syllable was concentrated such fire of mingled scorn and bitterness that Mrs. Waters knew at once that all was over.

For a while there was a silence in the room as of death, and then Olivia asked sternly:

“What do you want here? Are you not satisfied with the wrong you have done me that you come to insult me with this intrusion?”

“The wrong I have done you!” said Mrs. Waters faintly.

“Yes, or helped your brother Harold Maxwell to do me if you like it better. It is much the same.”

As the brother’s name reached the sister’s ears, it thrilled through her as with an electric shock.

“You know then?” she stammered. “You know that—that——”

"I know everything," said Olivia haughtily.

Mrs. Waters became so giddy that she had to cling to a chair for support.

"Everything! Do you really mean it? Everything!"

"Yes, I really mean it, everything—that your brother is a forger and a thief, and that I have been the weakest, blindest fool who ever fell into the hands of an accomplished professional——"

"Oh!" broke in Mrs. Waters with a cry of pain.

Olivia looked at her scornfully.

"What is the matter? Are you afraid that I shall try to punish him? You may set your mind at rest; I am too proud—too weak and silly perhaps I ought to say—to expose my own imbecility to the world for the mere sake of being revenged. The secret is safe with me—if that is what you came about, you may go away quite satisfied."

Mrs. Waters answered nothing—only stood as though thunderstruck, and Olivia, after waiting a moment, resumed:

"It seems to me that everything has been said

that it can possibly be necessary to say between us—now or at any future time, I hope you understand. I wish you good evening.”

She fixed her eyes on the drooping form before her coldly and severely, and with stately step and erect bearing passed from the room.

Mrs. Waters, left alone, bowed her head in a very agony of despair. .

CHAPTER IV.

The News Told at the Laurels.

HOW Mrs. Waters reached home that day she herself hardly knew. All the way nothing was present to her mind but the image of her brother, haggard and half delirious as she had seen him last; and she was scarcely conscious of where she was or whither she was going. But she knew the road by heart, and instinctively following it arrived at her own door just as night was closing in.

No sooner had she entered than she made straight for the library, the room where Austin was generally wont to spend the hour before dinner, reading newspapers or revising plans and estimates.

He was there now, sitting before the fire with a newspaper in his hand, which however he was

not just then studying, but held hanging loosely downwards while his eyes were turned thoughtfully towards the blaze. Mrs. Waters shut the door, and, having glanced cautiously round the well-lighted room to assure herself that he was quite alone, made a step forward as though about to speak. But in the meanwhile, disturbed by the noise she had made in entering, he looked round, and before she had time to say anything began impatiently :

“Is that you, Agnes? Where on earth have you been? I thought you were never coming, and I have been wanting so to speak to you. Come here. Make haste—I tell you I have something to speak to you about.”

“What is it?” she asked feverishly, for she thought he was going to tell her something about her brother.

“Look here—this confounded paper—not that it is any use to mind what such rascals say, of course, for they’ll say anything to fill up, but it worries a man for all that. Look here—this paragraph.”

He thrust the paper into her hand, pointing to a particular passage. She looked hurriedly ;

her mind was so full of her brother that, without considering probabilities, she could only imagine that her attention was being called to some statement concerning him—something which, seen by Olivia, had led to the fatal discovery of that day.

But her eyes only wandered helplessly among a tangle of words which for her had not the slightest meaning, interspersed here and there with unfamiliar names and unintelligible figures.

“Don’t you see it?” cried Austin fretfully.
“Here, I tell you—have you no eyes?”

He pointed again, and then she saw that the paragraph to which he was directing her attention was the following, inserted in the midst of a column headed “Monetary and Commercial:”—

We have pleasure in being authorised to announce that the unfavourable reports which prevailed last week as to the condition of the Grand Anglo-Cosmopolitan Loan Discount and Universal Assurance Company are entirely devoid of foundation. The conspicuous union of prudence and vigour which characterises the administration of this undertaking, no less than the well-known wealth of some of its principal shareholders, constitutes a sufficient guarantee for the entire fallaciousness of all sinister rumours.

“Haven’t you read it yet?” demanded Aus-

tin gruffly, noticing perhaps the listless look with which his wife's eyes rested on these lines.

"About the Anglo-Cosmopolitan?" she said, with a mechanical attempt to humour him.

"Yes, dear, very satisfactory, is it not? The unfavourable reports are not true, you see."

"Satisfactory! are you a fool? Confound it, who thought that there were any unfavourable reports at all? Of course I know very well they are not true—*that's* no news."

"Certainly, dear."

"And don't you go thinking I care much what those lying papers say, one way or another—they'll put in anything for money, and that's just a kind of thing I could fancy the editor making up out of his own head if the column wasn't long enough. But it's a damned infernal shame they should be allowed to go on so, that's what I complain of."

"Austin," broke out Mrs. Waters, no longer able to restrain her impatience, "I have something to say to you—something very particular. I have just seen Harry."

Austin's face did not grow any brighter at the intelligence.

"What! he has come back then?"

"Yes; he wrote to me this morning, and I went towards Egerton House to try to meet him. And I did meet him, Austin; and oh! if you could only have seen how he looked! He would not stop to speak, but I knew at once that something must have happened."

"Something happened! what? Speak out—what is the matter?"

"And I went on to Egerton House, and I saw Miss Egerton, and——oh! it kills me to think of it. It is all over between them; she has found out who he is, and——"

"Found out!" articulated Austin in a choking voice. His eyes glared at her so that they seemed ready to drop from their sockets, while his chest heaved with quick convulsive gasps which made her fear to see him fall to the ground from sheer want of breath.

"No, no, not that," she protested hastily—"not that, I do assure you. Only that he is my brother—indeed, indeed that is all."

"Is that all really?" he said, and seemed to grow a shade calmer.

"Yes, really it is, and if you could but hear

the cruel bitter things—She hates him as much as ever she used to love him, I am sure. And he—ah! I believe he has gone away to die.”

“He has gone away, then?” asked Austin, with what appeared to be an eager catching at the words.

“Yes, he has gone away, and oh! so wretched as he is! If you had only seen him, Austin! you would feel for him as I do. He loved her so dearly, and now to be hated and despised—”

“It was all your fault, Agnes. Why did you ever let them come together? I knew from the first it could bring no good.”

“What would you have had me do? I could not come between him and his happiness—you would not have wished me, surely. Ah! Austin, you have spoken unkindly sometimes, but I know you have never meant it, I know you have never forgotten how much——”

“Of course not, of course not, how could I? And I am sure anything I thought really calculated to promote his happiness I would have made every sacrifice in my power——”

“I know you would, dear Austin, I know

it. Oh yes! you have always loved him, always remembered what he has done for you, as he remembered what you had done for him—always, however vexed and harassed you have sometimes been with your own troubles. And you are sorry for him now that he is so miserable—ah! I see you are.”

“Nobody could be sorrier, I am sure. Only I always said——”

“Austin,” she went on quickly, for she had reached the point she had been aiming at throughout—“do you know what I have been thinking? I have been thinking that it is our duty to go and tell Miss Egerton everything.”

“What’s that you say?” he exclaimed, grasping her almost savagely by the arm. “Everything! what do you mean?”

Her heart sank within her as she saw his fierce excited look, but she made shift to answer with external calmness.

“I mean what I say—everything. Ah! for his sake who has done so much for you——”

He gnashed his teeth, and tightened his hold on her arm so that she nearly cried out with the pain.

"Never. Do you hear me? Never, never, never!"

"Austin, dear Austin——"

"What, you call me dear, and you want me to tell the world——"

"Only her, Austin, only her. Ah! think a little of him——"

"Think of *me*—do you want to kill me, do you want me to kill myself? Only her! only all Chorcombe, you mean—only all the world—it would come to the same thing. After all I have gone through! I tell you no—it shall not be—never—do you hear me—do you?"

He looked at her in a way that made her tremble for him as she saw, and, understanding that all further persuasion would be useless, she hastened to allay as far as might be the storm she had raised.

"If this is how you feel, I will say no more," she rejoined soothingly, and yet with a certain severity of manner which, strive as she would, she could not quite suppress. "I have proposed what I thought was an act of justice, but——"

"Justice! Was it my fault he came here? was it my fault he came back to England at

all? Did I want to see him, do you think? And because he chooses to run his head against a wall, am I to suffer——”

“I will say no more—surely that may content you. Oh! Austin, try——”

But a new idea had just occurred to him, disturbing him so violently that she might as well have spoken to the raging sea or wind.

“Perhaps you have told her already!” he cried, almost with a shriek.

“No, I have not, upon my honour. Oh! Austin, you may believe me, indeed you may—I am too great a coward to be so ready to tell what it breaks my heart even to think of.”

“He has told her then—it is all the same.”

“He has not, I swear he has not. Do you not know him better? He has promised, and he never broke a promise yet.”

“Yes, he has promised, I know that,” muttered Austin, evidently somewhat tranquillised by the argument—“and promised so that he could not break his word without being the greatest villain alive. But why did he put himself in the way of breaking it? That’s what I want to be told. Why did he come——”

"He has gone away now," interrupted the wife bitterly; "will not that satisfy you?"

"If I were sure he really were gone; if I were sure——But he will come back again, confound him—he will come back again."

She looked at him very coldly, more coldly perhaps than ever she had done in her life before. She was thinking of her brother and of the circumstances under which she had seen him last, and for the time forgot all her compassion for one who could speak of him with so little sympathy.

Austin probably saw something of her feelings, for he resumed with a slightly shamefaced air: "There, I didn't mean quite to say that; I can't stop to consider every word. You know very well how I look on him, just like my own brother, I'm sure, as of course I ought. But when you think of all I have gone through, you cannot wonder that I should be afraid——"

"You have nothing to be afraid of," she answered quietly. "He is gone, and will not trouble you by coming back again—not even if he lives," she added more harshly.

He drew a long breath, then after a pause went on with new anxiety :

“And what will people think when they hear that we have had him with us—under our roof—a person whom everybody knows to have been accused——”

“Very likely they would only think you a good brother-in-law for having forgiven him,” said Mrs. Waters, and this time she spoke in tones which sounded almost sarcastic in their suppressed bitterness. “But you need not be afraid of that either ; Miss Egerton expressly told me that for her own sake she would not expose him.”

“Why, then, it may all be as though this had never happened ?” said Austin, his brow perceptibly clearing.

“So far as you are concerned, yes.”

She glanced up at him as though about to add something very cutting, but he was looking so worn and gaunt and tremulous, so altogether unlike the hale hearty man who had been the husband of her youth, that she could not find it in herself to reproach him.

“You have nothing to be afraid of,” she

repeated, and then, feeling her eyes filling with tears which were no longer to be restrained, she hurried towards the door. She knew that there was no comfort for her in that room.

He did not attempt to detain her, and immediately afterwards she found herself with a full heart on her way upstairs.

She had reached the upper landing, and was pausing at the door of her own chamber, when she saw coming along the dimly lighted corridor a slight tripping figure which for years she had always associated with the idea of support and consolation. She had never needed support and consolation more than she did just now, and instinctively she waited for the little figure to come up.

"Is that you, darling?" she said, but indeed she knew very well who it was without asking.

"Why, mamma! What! you have only just come in! I am ready dressed for dinner, you see, and going down to the drawing-room. You won't be long, will you?"

"No. But—but don't go down yet, dear. Come into my room for a few minutes first."

The poor mother felt a craving for sympathy that was absolutely irresistible.

"Certainly, mamma dear," and Emmy followed her mother into the room with great alacrity. She was in good spirits, or at least felt that she ought to be in good spirits, which in some cases amounts to much the same thing. And certainly she could not fail to feel that she ought to be in good spirits after the implied declaration of love which she had that day received from Randal Egerton.

"Emmy darling, come and kiss me," said Mrs. Waters, sinking exhausted into a chair as soon as the door was closed. "I am very, very miserable."

"Mamma! dear mamma!" cried Emmy, running up and throwing her arms round her mother's neck. "My own sweet mamma, what is the matter?"

"I am so glad I was obliged to tell you what I did once, Emmy," murmured Mrs. Waters, quite clinging to the plump little arms cast so protectingly round her; "it is such a comfort to be able to speak freely to you. Miss Egerton has found out about—about—you know what I mean, Emmy. Everything is at an end, and oh! I am so unhappy."

Emmy felt a cold perspiration stand on her forehead as she heard. She thought of Randal, and the confession he had extorted from her during that pleasant walk home. Was it possible——

“Found out about—about Uncle Harold, do you mean? Oh! mamma, surely you must be mistaken.”

“No, I am not mistaken, I saw them both—first him and then Miss Egerton. And oh! Emmy, he looked so wretched! I am afraid he will never get over it.”

Emmy was in dreadful tribulation. Still it was utterly impossible that the discovery should be in the remotest degree due to any act of hers—utterly. He never could have betrayed her—he who had looked so tenderly into her eyes and bid her cast out fear, he who loved her with such evident depth of passionate devotion, he with whom her destiny was henceforth inseparably linked. But naturally she could not help being very much concerned.

“How did it happen?” she asked in a shaking voice. “Did any one tell her? But then no one could have known. How can it have happened?”

"I have no idea," said Mrs. Waters mournfully. "Whether he may have said something about his past life to make her suspect, and then from one thing to another—and yet I can't think that likely either. *You* never breathed a word about it to any one, Emmy, I am certain?"

"Oh mamma!" said Emmy. It was all that she was able to answer for the moment, but it was a sufficient answer for her mother, in whose ears the exclamation sounded quite reproachfully.

"Oh! of course I was quite sure it could not be through you, my darling."

"You may be quite sure indeed, mamma," said Emmy earnestly. The more she reflected, the more certain she became that it was not and could not be through her, and she felt that she might look her mother in the face and tell her so with a clear conscience. Why, it was not two hours yet since Randal had parted from her with that farewell assurance of fidelity and love, and that farewell pressure of the hand which, without any spoken assurance at all, would have been a sufficient pledge of his feelings towards

her. Not two hours. So that if he had been Olivia's informant he must have gone straight from her presence to Egerton House, must have left her with the express purpose of betraying her. It was really very satisfactory to be provided with such an answer to any doubts of his prudence which, had the discovery been made a few days or weeks later, might otherwise have arisen in her mind.

"Poor dear mamma," she resumed caressingly, having completely restored her own self-satisfaction by this course of reasoning. "I am so very sorry for you."

"I knew you would be, dear child."

"Yes, and for him too," rejoined Emmy generously, for the sight of her mother's grief had thoroughly softened her—"for him too. I am sure he was quite a changed character, and I believe I should have got to like him very much in time, and really to look upon him almost as an uncle, though of course most people—Oh! mamma," she exclaimed, breaking off, for a horrid idea had just presented itself, "what will be thought of us for having forgiven him so far, for having actually had him in our house and

introduced him to our friends? Oh! I am afraid the remarks we shall hear will be quite terrible."

Yes, and the remarks would reach the ears of Randal Egerton and his family; that was worst of all. They could make no difference to his feelings, of course, but he could not fail to be very much annoyed.

"You think of that too?" said Mrs. Waters with a strange smile. "You need not be afraid, neither you nor your father. Miss Egerton has promised to keep our secret for us, and he has gone away, never to trouble you again. You have nothing to fear—all the misery, all the disgrace, is borne by him alone."

Emmy felt considerable relief at hearing that this was the case, though, observing that her mother had spoken rather bitterly, she did not exactly like to express it.

"I am sure I am as sorry for him as any one can be," she said with an air of apology. "But you know, mamma dear, it is really only natural——"

"Oh yes! I dare say it is natural enough—of course it is," assented Mrs. Waters, but still,

as it appeared to Emmy, somewhat coldly. "There, you can go downstairs now, Emmy, I shall be better alone."

"You are not angry with me, mamma?"

"Oh no! why should I? poor child! But I shall be better alone—indeed."

It was manifest that Mrs. Waters, notwithstanding the craving for sympathy she had felt a few minutes before, really did wish to be left to herself now; so Emmy, having first kissed her mother's cheek very tenderly, tripped softly out of the room. She was not sorry herself to be alone again; she had been very much disturbed by the intelligence she had just heard, and now gladly let her thoughts revert to him whom she instinctively regarded as her chief comforter. Ah! how delightful to have some one to whom she could unbosom all her griefs, all her anxieties—some one of whose warm and undivided sympathy she could be quite sure! And such a one she would shortly have by her side—avowed in his true character to all the world; had he not promised to speak to her father, and had he not promised in so many words not to put off long? Oh yes! he would

come very, very soon, and what loving comfort he would pour into her ear, what tender reproaches for the momentary doubt of him that she had felt !

CHAPTER V.

Suspense.

“**I**S there nothing for me?” asked Mrs. Waters anxiously the next morning, when the letter-bag was laid as usual before her husband.

“Nothing this morning.”

A look of intense disappointment fell on the poor wife’s countenance. She had been racked all night with suspense concerning her brother, the memory of whose white face and distraught bloodshot eyes had hardly for an instant been absent from her thoughts, and she had looked forward with feverish impatience to the morning, in the hope of receiving the tidings which he had promised. And now she was condemned to wait another day without knowing how he was bearing his misery, or if it had not crushed him

altogether—in ignorance even of his whereabouts. She understood that she could hardly have expected news of him so soon, but the idea of having to wait longer for it was a kind of torture.

Emmy saw something of her mother's distress, and felt for it very deeply. She was perfectly sure that it could not have been brought about by any fault of hers, but still she could not help being a little self-reproachful in remembering that she had permitted herself to speak to a third person of a secret the importance of which Mrs. Waters's pale cheeks and care-worn look impressed upon her more forcibly than ever it had been impressed before. She felt that she had, however harmlessly, committed a breach of confidence, and in spite of her conviction that under the exceptional circumstances of the case no evil had come, or by any possibility could come, of her imprudence, she was perhaps more moved by the sight of her mother's anxiety than she would have been if her conscience had been quite clear. So she sat unusually silent and depressed, leaving the room as soon as breakfast was over expressly

in order to give her parents an opportunity of discussing the matter in her absence.

The opportunity so considerably made was, however, not profited by. The name of Harold Maxwell was probably uppermost in Austin's mind as it was in his wife's—indeed her visible suffering must alone have sufficed to remind him of it—but it was not mentioned by either. He made a few comments on sundry items of news in that morning's paper, and among other things remarked how very satisfactory it was to have such good accounts of the Anglo-Cosmopolitan from Frisby ; for that gentleman had looked in last night, and laughed to scorn the idea of unfavourable reports having been in circulation. And Mrs. Waters agreed that it was very satisfactory indeed, but said not a word to show that any other subject was in her thoughts.

The truth was, she was conscious that on the one subject which just now lay next her heart her husband and herself were out of sympathy, and that it was therefore best avoided between them. But this consciousness was in itself a serious aggravation of her wretchedness. They

had been married more than five-and-twenty years, and this was the first time that she had been obliged to keep a grief to herself from such a cause.

She was able to speak more freely when Austin had gone out for the day, and she was alone with her daughter again. But though Emmy was very kind and caressing, even kinder and more caressing than usual, Emmy evidently did not wish to say much on this topic of her uncle Harold, and not much therefore was said. As may be supposed, the topic for Emmy was not altogether a satisfactory one, besides which she was too much taken up with her own concerns to be exactly in a sympathising frame of mind. She was as sorry for her mother's unhappiness as she could be for anything just now, but she was all day in a state of nervous excitement and expectation which made her incapable of fixing her thoughts on any idea save one for two minutes together. Every sound at the bell, every distant footstep out of doors, sent all her blood rushing to her heart. Was he coming to claim her, that high-born lover of hers to whom her troth was already virtually

plighted, coming to lay his homage openly at her feet, and bring her mother comfort in the prospect of so brilliant a son-in-law? He had said he would come soon, and he would keep his word. *He* would not desert her and insult her and make her ashamed of herself for having thought of him; he was not John Thwaites—no indeed, but somebody very, very different.

Thus she continued waiting and watching all day; and when the evening approached and still the expected suitor had not made his appearance, her excitement hardly abated. He had not come to-day, but that made it only the more certain that he would come to-morrow.

The morrow arrived, but the morrow was only a repetition of the previous day. In the morning there was the same eager inquiry on Mrs. Waters's part for a letter, the same look of disappointment, only increased and intensified, on being told that there was none; and on Emmy's part the same feeling of remorse and self-reproach (perhaps a little increased too) at sight of her mother's grief, merging as the day went on into the same straining expectation on her own behalf, the same intent listen-

ing for slight sounds, the same waiting and watching, accompanied by the same certainty that she could not have to wait and watch long. She was sure that she might trust him; she could not doubt, remembering his parting words and his parting look. A thousand things might have happened to delay him; the days were so short and the roads were so bad—and then he had not positively fixed any time; he had only said “before long.” She would not, could not let herself be discouraged, and when that day drew to a close without bringing him she was still reasonable in her impatience, and once more looked forward to the morrow.

But another morrow came, and another, and another, and in dreary succession yet others after these, and still no Randal Egerton. She watched and listened and counted the hours, but the hours rolled on, and each new flash of hope only died out in new disappointment. Footsteps passed and re-passed, but none of them was his; from time to time a summons sounded at the bell, but his name was not announced.

She grew weary and sick with waiting, and kept conning and re-conning all that had passed

at their last interview, as her only talisman against absolute despair. For still she did not despair—how could she with the circumstances of that interview fresh in her memory? No man worthy the name of man could be guilty of the baseness of betraying her, and was it possible to suspect that he could be—he, Randal Egerton, one of the first gentlemen in the county? And then, while it was out of the question to imagine that he had deliberately broken his promise, there were so many causes which might account for unavoidable delay in its fulfilment. He might be ill, perhaps (ah! how grievous to think upon!), or some member of his family might be ill (not quite so bad that), or he might have been unexpectedly called away on business, or——Oh yes! there was only one thing which she might be quite sure of, and that was, that he could not be to blame. But though she kept on comforting herself so bravely, she grew every day more anxious and depressed, every day somehow more self-reproachful at sight of her mother's anxiety and depression.

For while Emmy had been waiting thus in vain, Mrs. Waters had been waiting in vain

too. The expected letter from her brother had not come, and she was left ignorant where he had gone or where he intended to go, whether he was in health or sickness, whether he was alive or dead.

Perhaps it was because she was older and more experienced, perhaps because her temperament was naturally less sanguine, but waiting went a great deal harder with Mrs. Waters than with her daughter. While Emmy was always buoying herself up with bright expectations of what was going to happen, always comforting herself under disappointment with renewed hope, Mrs. Waters was a prey to the darkest fears, which when she tried to banish them only pressed on her more heavily and more persistently. He had promised to write, and even without promising would he not certainly have done so had he been alive and well? But he had not written—what then could she think? And he had looked so ill when she saw him last; even before there had been time for a letter to reach her she had been afraid of something happening. Something *had* happened then—and what?

The most horrible visions were perpetually haunting her, of her brother tossing on a bed of sickness and delirium, dying perhaps in the midst of rough uncaring strangers—and even this was not the worst fear which tormented her. He had looked so wild and distracted as he parted from her, almost like one already irresponsible for his actions; who knew but that in his frenzy and his despair he might have been tempted—She dared not fully form the thought even in her own mind, and yet she could not keep it from constantly recurring.

To make her misery greater she was unable, lest the motive of her interest should be suspected, to take any effectual steps towards setting her suspense at rest by inquiry. She had indeed the pain of hearing a good many rumours regarding Mr. Graham's sudden disappearance, which, with the lovers' quarrel that was its presumed cause, was naturally enough for a few days the theme of all the gossips of Chorcombe. But amidst all the idle talk and speculation to which she was condemned to listen, hardly anything definite reached her ears, and what little did was not of a re-assuring

nature. It seemed pretty certain that he had left the town by railway, for he had been seen waiting at the station by a servant of the inn where he had put up in the morning. So far this information might have been satisfactory, as showing some coherency of thought and purpose; but when it was further said that this same servant had asked him what was to be done with his luggage left at the inn, that he had answered with a promise to send for it next day, and that he had as yet failed to do so, Mrs. Waters could not but feel her worst apprehensions strengthened and confirmed. As the days followed each other, gradually swelling into weeks, and still she heard nothing, such intense anxiety took possession of her mind that it began to be a relief to her rather than a disappointment to be told each morning that there were no tidings. She could not now imagine any tidings that were not bad, and looked with dismay on every letter and every paper that came to the house lest it should contain the intelligence which she dreaded. Thus she went on, fearing more every day, and growing every day more and more miserable.

And meanwhile poor Emmy, though still hoping rather than fearing, went on growing more miserable also.

There was not a great deal said between mother and daughter at this time; the hearts of both were too full for either to feel inclined for much conversation. But Mrs. Waters noticed that Emmy was unwontedly subdued in spirits, and, ascribing the change altogether to sympathy with her own distress, was very much touched by it, and even comforted. It was pleasant to believe that there was one person in the world who felt for her, and in some degree with her, in her sorrow; and such a belief she could not entertain concerning her husband. It has been said that she had an instinct at the first that Austin was out of sympathy with her on the subject of her solicitude, and this instinct went on gathering force as time advanced. In proportion as she became more terrified and unhappy, it seemed to her that he grew more and more re-assured; and at last she fancied that she could almost measure her own reason for apprehension by the standard of his comparative tranquillity. This

being the case, she scrupulously avoided saying a word to him on the matter, and when from time to time her pent-up feelings forced their way to the surface, it was always her daughter whom she chose as a confidant.

"Dear Emmy," she said once when the girl was looking more than usually dejected, "how good you are to me! You have everything to make you glad, and yet just because you see me grieving you are quite miserable. You must not be too unhappy on my account, my darling."

"I am very sorry for you of course, mamma," said Emmy, wincing a good deal as she thought how much less her mother's suffering had to do with her depression than her mother seemed to believe. "And I would give anything, I'm sure, to see you happy again—that I would, anything in the world. But I believe you are making yourself uneasy without cause, mamma dear, indeed I do. Take my word for it, it will all come right."

Perhaps these words of comfort were partly addressed to herself as well as to her mother. But Mrs. Waters never thought of that.

"It could not all come right," she answered mournfully, "unless he could be again what he was once to Miss Egerton. But if I could only think that he was alive, if I could only believe that he did not part from me that day to go to his death——"

"Oh! mamma, that is surely——"

"If you had seen him, Emmy, if you had but seen him, you would understand why I am afraid. He was scarcely in his right mind even then."

"But, mamma, it is so much more likely that he has only left the country. Oh! depend upon it, in a few weeks you will be hearing from some place abroad——"

"A few weeks! And how am I to wait? Oh! child, you little know what I suffer! The suspense is killing me. If only I could try to find out, if only I had an idea of the direction he had taken, so that I might follow or make inquiries! But to have to sit here and wait and do nothing while he is dying perhaps—it will drive me mad."

"Oh! mamma pet, pray, pray don't talk so," expostulated Emmy. She did not add that her

uncle Harold was scarcely worthy of being the object of such extreme solicitude, but the idea certainly passed through her mind.

"I cannot help it, Emmy. I am miserable—so miserable that sometimes I think I am half mad already. All this came so suddenly, and I was so happy just before—every now and then I have a feeling that it cannot have happened at all, that I have only been dreaming. How can she have found out? It seems impossible when one thinks of it, does it not?"

"It is very strange no doubt," said Emmy, wincing a little more this time. "But he is so good now that I suppose he must have felt it his duty to tell her how wicked he had been once, don't you think that was it, mamma?"

"That he told her himself, do you mean? You know nothing about it," said Mrs. Waters, rather more peremptorily than usual.

"Of course I can't say for certain, mamma, but I really think that when one considers how much it must have been on his conscience——"

"You know nothing about it," cried Mrs. Waters again; and then, somewhat abruptly, as though the conversation had suddenly become

more painful than she could bear, she rose and left the room.

Emmy was a good deal surprised at finding Mrs. Waters reject thus decisively and almost angrily an explanation which in the girl's eyes seemed so eminently probable and natural. How blindly attached her mother was to that erring brother of hers, to be sure!—it looked sometimes as though she almost forgot that he had ever been guilty. But Emmy did not forget his guilt by any means, and, pondering it deeply in her own mind, became more and more impressed with the probability of her theory. What could be more likely than that her uncle Harold, possessing doubtless many good qualities, and constantly oppressed by the memory of his crime, should have been stung by Miss Egerton's generosity into making a full and unreserved confession? And then how could the truth have reached Miss Egerton's ears in any other way? Her mother, perhaps, if she knew all, might, blinded by morbid suspicion, imagine that Randal had told the terrible secret; but Emmy, with her eyes clear and wide open, saw plainly that this could not be. He was a gen-

tleman, not a perjurer and a villain, and none but a perjurer and a villain could have been guilty of so foul an abuse of confidence. Why, look at John Thwaites who had used her so badly; she might have trusted him with a thousand secrets and he would never have betrayed her—never, let him be as angry as he would. Yes, there was that good in him certainly. And was it likely that Randal Egerton, who loved her and was a gentleman—Ah no!—a thousand times no. And he did love her; of course he loved her—there was no more doubt of that than there was of his being a gentleman. He had not come yet as he had promised, but the very length of the delay proved that something unusual must have happened to cause it. Even if that memorable walk had never taken place, it would have been his business to call by this time to pay his respects after the party; almost every other gentleman invited had done so, and certainly he would not have omitted so important a social duty till now under any ordinary circumstances. There was thus evidently some extraordinary detaining cause in operation, but that cause, whatever it was, must inevitably

cease sooner or later, and then, as inevitably, he would come. Oh yes! he would come, she might look for him from day to day. But day after day passed, and she was left still hoping, as her mother was left still fearing.

Nearly three weeks had been spent in this weary waiting, and it was already within three or four days of Christmas, when one morning Mrs. Waters, watching intently as usual while her husband opened his letters, saw him as he unfolded one of them suddenly turn pale. Her own heart grew cold within her; had the dreaded announcement come at last?

"What is it?" she asked faintly.

But before there was time for any answer to come, the letter had fallen from his hands, and with a cry he sank back helpless in his chair.

"Papa!" shrieked Emmy. "Are you ill?"

But Mrs. Waters's alarm was not just now for her husband, and, staggering forward, she lifted the fallen letter, and fastened her eyes on it as though she expected, as in truth she did, that it was to decide a question of life or death.

The letter, however, contained tidings alto-

gether different from any she had looked for—so different indeed that it was some time before she could so much as understand what it was about. When at last, finding that its contents were not those she had expected, she grew sufficiently calm to wonder what they really might be, she saw that they ran as follows :—

1, *Blue-Bag Buildings, Bedford Row,*
London, W.C., December 20th.

DEAR SIR,

Finding from documents now in my possession that you are the most important shareholder in the Grand Anglo-Cosmopolitan Loan Discount and Universal Assurance Company, as well as one of the few Directors whose address is at present known, I feel it my duty as solicitor appointed by the Board to acquaint you of the existence of certain very painful rumours which there is too much reason to believe well-founded, and which it may be more agreeable to your feelings to be first apprized of through some other medium than that of the public press. In the unexpected absence, it is believed on the Continent, of the Chairman and Secretary of the Company, it is impossible at this moment to enter into any full statement of particulars, but as far as can be judged from the present aspect of affairs it appears only too probable that the shareholders will have to be called upon for the greater part, if not the whole, of the sums standing over on their respective shares, amounting to five times the paid-up capital.

Trusting that this communication may reach you in time to avert any unpleasant surprise,

I remain, Dear Sir,

Yours truly,

JOSEPH SHARPLES.

“Is that all?” said Mrs. Waters when at last she understood, and, turning towards her husband, who was still leaning back prostrate and half fainting in his chair, she added, with a touch of severity in her voice: “Be a man, Austin; think how much worse news than this we might have heard.”

“Worse! what could be worse?” he murmured, and his hands clenched themselves with spasmodic yet feeble violence. “Don’t you see what he says about the money standing over—five times the amount? We shall be ruined—ruined outright.”

“Ruined!” ejaculated Emmy, and in her turn caught up the letter, which her mother had now laid down.

“And if we are, we must learn to bear it,” said Mrs. Waters calmly. “Austin, be brave, what good can this do?”

“Oh! my poor dear papa!” cried Emmy,

after a glance at the letter, and rushed up to fling herself on her father's neck, with a burst of sympathy the more demonstrative as she could not but think her mother strangely unfeeling. "My poor dear papa! But oh! don't speak like that, 'papa darling'; it can't be so bad as they think, I am sure it can't, the horrid man must be mistaken. And even if it was all true, papa, we couldn't be what you said we were, you know we couldn't. What! ruined, and the Beacon Bay railway going to be made—what can have put such a thing into your head?"

She had struck the right chord. He raised himself slightly in his chair, and a faint flush came to his cheek, as though his blood were beginning to resume its natural flow.

"Ah! to be sure—the Beacon Bay railway. Say that again, child, say that again."

"What, papa, had you actually forgotten? But you see now how safe we are, you see now, don't you? Why, if we had lost every farthing, Beacon Bay would make it all up to us, over and over again."

"Of course, of course," he cried, drawing her fondly to his side. "My own dear little girl!

Why, Emmy, you are the cool-headed man of business to-day, and I am only the child."

"That dreadful letter upset you, papa, and no wonder," said Emmy, modestly parrying the compliment, though not at all insensible to it. "But you see now, let the worst come to the worst, we have nothing to be afraid of. And perhaps the worst may not come to the worst either; perhaps you are not liable for anything, or perhaps it is all a mistake together, who knows?"

Austin shook his head gloomily; he just understood enough of business not to see his way clearly to the adoption of this pleasant theory.

"Well, upon my word, I shouldn't wonder," persisted Emmy, who had too good a conceit just now of her own judgment to be easily put down. "I don't see how it can be law that you should be robbed like that, and when you go to Mr. Frisby I shan't be a bit surprised if he tells you the same."

"Frisby!" shouted Austin fiercely, and the name seemed to be a more effectual restorative than anything that had gone before. "Frisby!

and do you think I am ever going near him again—that damned infernal villain who talked me over into putting my money in this vile swindle?”

“Did he really, papa?” said Emmy, who from what she had at different times heard had always been under the impression that it was her father who had talked over Mr. Frisby into admitting him to a valuable secret, “did he really? Then he is a wicked cheating creature who deserves any name you can give him—if it is true what this letter says, at least—and it will just serve him right to lose all your custom when you are rich again. But——”

“Yes, he will be sorry then—confound him, he will be sorry then,” muttered Austin, and ground his teeth in vindictive triumph.

“But I can’t believe it is true, papa; I can’t believe but what if you just go and show him that letter——You must show it to somebody, you know, so perhaps you had better try him first.”

Austin was silent for an instant. Yes, certainly so far Emmy was right—he must show that letter to somebody; he must consult with

some professional adviser on the amount of his liability and the mode of meeting it, and that without delay. And who save Frisby was there to consult?

"I will go and see about it then. And if it turns out true, if it does——Damn the fellow, I'll tell him what I think of him," he concluded, springing to his feet.

And so reviving was this idea of speaking his mind to his betrayer, if indeed he had been betrayed, that, without further time required for considering his purpose or steadying his nerves, he took leave of his wife and daughter, and straightway started for Mr. Frisby's, with a fiery energy of demeanour which showed that for the present at least anger had galvanised him into new life.

CHAPTER VI.

Worse and Worse.

WHETHER or not this anger was altogether wholesome for him, Austin's visit to Mr. Frisby did not serve in any degree to allay it. He was kept waiting a long time without seeing anybody but a clerk, who told him his master was particularly engaged just then with a client, and when at last his persistence was rewarded by a sight of the lawyer himself, he did not learn anything satisfactory. Probably this was not the fault of Mr. Frisby, but rather of facts which were too strong for him, for nothing could have exceeded the urbanity of that gentleman's expressions of regret and surprise on hearing what had happened. Still, urbanity notwithstanding, it did not seem that he had anything to recommend or suggest, or

even any consolation to offer beyond shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head and saying he was very sorry.

"What! you mean to tell me I have nothing to do but to stand still and be robbed of more than a hundred thousand pounds?" said Austin, trembling, but as much with wrath as consternation.

"I am very sorry," said Mr. Frisby, rubbing his hands obsequiously, almost as though going through a form of washing them, "very sorry indeed, but I really do not see what else—— You had upwards of eleven hundred shares if you recollect—eleven hundred and sixty I think was the exact number—and as you only paid a fifth part of the price down, it follows of course that if application for the residue is now made——A most unforeseen circumstance, I am sure, and regretted by no one more than myself."

"Silence, blackguard!" thundered Austin, and brought down his hand on the table in a paroxysm of rage which he could no longer bridle.

"Eh?" said Mr. Frisby, starting in innocent

surprise. "Who were you alluding to, sir?"

"To the greatest villain unhung," retorted Austin furiously, and advanced his fist so near the lawyer's face that there could no longer exist any doubt as to whom his words were intended for. "Scoundrel, you have done your best to ruin me, and it is not your fault if you have not succeeded."

Mr. Frisby retreated a few steps, looking very pale, but still retaining sufficient presence of mind to smile feebly as though in half compassionate deprecation.

"If I were what you take me for, Mr. Waters," he said in rather a faint voice, "you could hardly address such language to me with impunity. But I know how to make allowances for mental suffering, and I will not take advantage of actionable violence into which you have been betrayed in a moment of weakness. I am sorry for you, sir, and therefore I can bear a great deal."

But Austin did not hear; perhaps it was as well that he did not, or he might have been tempted to make practical experiment of how much Mr. Frisby really could bear. He had

already moved towards the door, and now, while he paused to open it, turned round to say :

“ You are a liar and swindler and vagabond, and if I should be as rich as Croesus, not a brass farthing of my money shall ever find its way again into your pocket.”

And with this parting denunciation he dashed out of the office, somewhat relieved by the thought of what he had said, but still fuming with passion to which no mere words could have given adequate vent.

His passion was so far useful that it served temporarily to stave off reflections which must otherwise have made that day a great deal darker to him than it was. He returned home far from despondent, and inclined rather to inveigh against Frisby than to brood on his own misfortunes. This comparatively sanguine mood continued even after his first anger had begun to cool—kept up partly by the cheering influence of Emmy’s representations, partly perhaps by one or two visits which he found it necessary to pay to a certain cupboard in his library of which mention has been already made. Be

this as it may, when he went to bed that night he had hardly given a serious thought to any difficulties that might be awaiting him in the future.

But with the earliest moment of waking next morning the inevitable re-action set in. The idea of the sum of money which he would have to make good was the first that presented itself with returning consciousness, and in the absence of any strong counter-excitement it seemed to crush him to the very earth. All elasticity both of body and mind was gone; he had not energy even to complain or bewail himself. As a matter of habit he rose at the usual hour, and somehow or other got through the task of dressing, but when he entered the breakfast-room it was with a worn, listless, half abstracted air which made his wife and daughter greet him in mournful silence, instinctively feeling that nothing they could say would do him good.

A heap of letters was awaiting him—so many that if any trace of his usual sanguineness had been left he would surely have hoped that one among them might contain something either to contradict the news of yesterday, or at least to

modify its import. But no such hope occurred to him, no definite expectation indeed of any kind, and as he mechanically sat down to open his letters it was with an utter want of interest in their contents.

The first which chanced to come to hand was not of a sort to lighten the oppression that weighed so heavily on his spirits. It was from Mr. Tovey, and began by stating with how much regret the writer had learned the calamity that had fallen on the Grand Anglo-Cosmopolitan Loan Discount and Universal Assurance Company, in which undertaking he remembered to have heard Mr. Waters speak of being more or less interested. As he had the pen in his hand, it would not perhaps be considered out of place if he took this opportunity of asking Mr. Waters what were his views with regard to the prosecution of the works at Beacon Bay and Chorcombe Lodge, and whether they were to be continued on the same scale as heretofore, and at the same rate of progress. He regretted that he had not yet had time to prepare an exact report of the expenses incurred since Mr. Waters's last cash instalment, but they certainly were

not less than eight thousand pounds, and as a very expensive stage was now being reached, he feared it would be requisite to ask Mr. Waters for immediate payment before the works could be proceeded with. He would forward an account with full particulars next day, but in the meantime, knowing Mr. Waters's anxiety that no avoidable delay should arise, had ventured to trouble him with this statement of what would at the least be necessary to defray expenses already incurred. An immediate answer would much oblige.

On reading this epistle Austin's countenance grew if possible a shade blanker even than before. He made, however, no spoken comment, merely pushing the letter wearily across the table to his wife and daughter, and with slow automatic motion putting out his hand for the next. Perhaps he had a sort of idea now what that morning's voluminous correspondence might be about.

If he did make any guess on the subject, it was only too correct. Some of the letters he next opened began, like Mr. Tovey's, with a few words of respectful condolence on the now

publicly announced collapse of the Anglo-Cosmopolitan; others, more astutely if not more delicately, ignored the topic altogether, but the burden of one and all was practically the same. First Mr. D'Almayne, being in immediate want of funds without which he would be unable to execute a very costly commission just received, was compelled to ask Mr. Waters for the purchase money of the valuable pictures the acquisition of which had, according to his wish, been made for the gallery at Chorcombe Lodge. Next the carriage-builder who had supplied the magnificent equipage so dear to Emmy's heart had a large amount to make up, which unfortunately left him no choice but to trouble Mr. Waters with his little account; and then the upholsterer who had received the order for the furnishing of the new house thought it might be satisfactory to Mr. Waters to possess a memorandum of the outlay already made in furtherance of his views; while Mr. Jupp, the house-agent, suddenly found the owners of the Laurels pressing for the payment of the last half-year's rent. There were two or three other applications which it is not necessary to specify, but

the upshot was that Austin found himself called upon for sums the gross amount of which would wholly exhaust the balance of property left him by the failure of the Anglo-Cosmopolitan; and he knew that even these were far from representing all the demands which might be made on him. He read and laid down the last of the letters, still uttering no word, and then sat staring before him, with a stolid fixity of gaze that spoke of something like despair.

There was silence among the family group for some time, broken at last by Emmy.

"Don't vex about it too much, papa dear. Beacon Bay will make it all right again in time, you know."

But things had come to such a pass with him that even the idea of Beacon Bay failed to bring comfort. He turned his eyes slowly towards the speaker, asking:

"And how am I to keep Beacon Bay if I owe already more than I am worth?"

Emmy made no answer; she knew not in truth what answer to make, this being a view of the case which had not yet occurred to her. Austin waited as though half expecting coun-

sel, then, finding that she had none to give, let his head droop forward on his breast, and all was again silence.

The silence this time lasted longer than before, wife and daughter both fearing to make matters worse by futile attempts at consolation, and besides he was evidently meditating. At length the fruit of his meditation disclosed itself, and, looking furtively from one to the other as if almost afraid of the effect of his own words, he said in very low depressed accents, which, however, it manifestly cost him an effort to bring out at all:

“Suppose I were to go and speak to Podmore?”

“Oh! do, Austin, do,” entreated Mrs. Waters, who would have made this very proposal long ago had she dared, and, save for the utter break-down of spirit which it indicated, could have wished nothing better than that it should come from her husband himself.

“Mr. Podmore!” ejaculated Emmy in amazement, but an instant’s reflection served to show her too that no wiser course could be adopted, and she joined her influence to that of her mother in recommending it.

Thus urged, Austin languidly gathered his letters together, and, putting them into his pocket as part of the case to be consulted on, prepared to betake himself to Mr. Podmore's, setting out, however, with a slow lagging step as different as possible from that with which he had started yesterday for Mr. Frisby's.

Poor Mrs. Waters and Emmy, left alone, spent a very miserable morning. It has been shown that they both had their private troubles quite apart from Austin's, but this made them only the less able to bear the anxiety which they could not but feel at sight of his bodily and mental suffering, to say nothing of their own threatened reverse of fortune. They spoke little to each other on this new subject of uneasiness, or indeed on any other, but sat waiting for what news the husband and father might bring back, in a suspense which increased with every half-hour of his absence. If he did not find some promise of hope and assistance where he had now gone to seek for it, what would become of them? Above all, what would become of him?

They had been sitting thus a long time, very

dejectedly and drearily, when all at once a ring was heard at the visitors' bell which made both look up in some surprise, while to Emmy it caused a strange thrill of excited expectation. Who could it be? Her father was wont to re-enter the house by a back way without ringing at all, and the weather was damp and foggy, by no means such as would be chosen by any caller not bound on special business. Was it then he at last?—brought in haste to her side by the news of the family misfortune—risen perhaps from a sick-bed to give her the comfort and support she so much needed? Ah! if it was—if it really was! When, on the opening of the house door, she heard the sound of manly footsteps in the hall, she felt actually afraid of looking up lest, after all she had gone through, the excitement of seeing him enter should be more than she could bear.

Still, without looking up, she heard the footsteps draw nearer and nearer. They paused close outside the room, there was a sound as of the turning of a handle, and then through the tumult of her senses she heard the announcement:

“Mr. and Mrs. Elkins.”

Poor Emmy! it was as though a bucketful of cold water had been dashed over her.

The new-comers could hardly have failed to gather from their reception that the shadow of some great calamity rested on the household, even if no reports of it had already reached them. Mrs. Waters was pale and care-worn, and went forward to meet them with a listless mournfulness of manner which she could not even attempt to conceal, while Emmy murmured a few inaudible words of greeting with a halt startled, half vacant air, as though she did not very well know where she was or what she was doing. But Mr. and Mrs. Elkins were much too polite to appear to observe these symptoms, and went through the regular forms of salutation as if nothing had happened, then, still as if nothing had happened, sat down and launched into decorous small-talk about the weather.

When this subject was exhausted—and, Mrs. Waters and Emmy only answering in monosyllables, it could not be made to hold out very long—Mr. Elkins, after one or two gentle preliminary hems, looked round the room, and

with a slight appearance of embarrassment remarked :

"Mr. Waters is out just now, I think the servant said?"

"He has gone to Mr. Podmore's," answered Mrs. Waters in subdued tones. "He is in great trouble to-day—about the failure of this company, you know."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Elkins with an assumption of surprise, but immediately afterwards, feeling perhaps that it was impossible to ignore the subject longer, however much he might have liked for reasons of his own to do so, he dropped the surprise, and went on sympathisingly: "Ah yes! I heard something about it—most deeply concerned, I am sure. But I would fain trust that the accounts are very greatly exaggerated?"

"I don't know—I hope so," sadly responded Mrs. Waters. "My poor husband is very anxious."

"I am extremely sorry for it," said Mr. Elkins with extra solemnity, intended perhaps to carry off a certain awkwardness of which he was conscious.

"And so am I—extremely," chimed in Mrs. Elkins, adjusting her bonnet strings. "But Mr. Waters knows in what quarter to look for consolation, and he will not fail, I hope, to turn to it."

"That is the great point," said Mr. Elkins, feeling himself professionally called upon to put in something.

"We must look upon these trials as sent for our good, and learn to rejoice over them," rejoined Mrs. Elkins with unction. "What are worldly riches but a snare, and what then is their loss down to the uttermost farthing——"

"But it is not so bad as that by any means," said Emmy, looking up hastily, for this sympathy was more than she could bear. "Papa may be a little inconvenienced for a time, until the railway is made, but that will be all, I am sure."

"Really! I am most truly glad to hear it," replied Mrs. Elkins fervently, forgetting perhaps what she had said about the snare.


"Most truly glad indeed," echoed her husband.

He shifted uneasily on his chair, and paused

a little while, as though he would have liked somebody else to follow up the conversation, but every one kept silence, and with another clearing of his throat he went on :

“My object in calling—one of my objects at least—was to hand Mr. Waters a little account which has just been sent in to me. The memorial window, you know; if you remember, Mr. Waters undertook to make up whatever amount might be left undefrayed by public subscription, and of course I am obliged to present him with the bill as soon as I have received it—especially as the people seem to say they are rather pressed for money. Three hundred pounds is the amount, you will perceive—all strictly within the estimate—so that, deducting the five pounds which I succeeded in raising in the shape of subscriptions, that will only leave two hundred and ninety-five pounds to trouble Mr. Waters for. Perhaps you will kindly mention it to him on his return—I shall be so very much obliged to you.”

He handed Mrs. Waters a folded paper, which she received with trembling fingers, promising that it should be attended to.



"The window has been wonderfully admired," said Mr. Elkins, with something that sounded almost like apology in his tones. "It is quite surprising how many strangers speak to me about it, and wish to know who put it up."

But Mrs. Waters made no reply, so Mr. Elkins did not enlarge further on the subject, and sat for a time in awkward silence, casting about for something else to talk of. He felt that it would not look quite the thing to go away at once.

"Pray have you seen anything of Miss Egerton lately?" asked Mrs. Elkins, coming to her husband's assistance.

"Miss Egerton!" stammered Mrs. Waters, shrinking with pain at the memories which the name suggested. "N—no, not for some time."

"I know she keeps herself very much to herself just now," said Mrs. Elkins, "but I thought perhaps she might have made an exception with intimate friends like you."

"I have not seen her for some time," reiterated Mrs. Waters tremulously. She would have given anything to change the subject, but knew not how.

“Not since the breaking-off of her engagement, then?”

“No.”

“How very odd she is, to be sure!” commented Mrs. Elkins mincingly. “One would have thought that however much she might wish just for the present to keep out of the way of strangers, she would have made a point of explaining matters to a few intimate friends, or at least to some one person in a position of authority—her clergyman, for instance. What can she expect people to think of such conduct—engaging herself to a man and then quarrelling with him, and never a word of explanation! And even Mrs. Waddilove knows no more about it than anybody else—I saw her the other day, and she declared she knew nothing except that Miss Egerton had told her the marriage was broken off, and that she never wished to hear Mr. Graham’s name again. Now, without any wish to pry into anybody’s private affairs, I say people have no right to make these mysteries.”

“Miss Egerton was always rather eccentric,” said Mr. Elkins, palliatively.

"Oh! of course," assented his wife, "every one knows that. Indeed it was a most eccentric proceeding altogether, her engaging herself to this Mr. Graham—a man who seemed to have dropped from the clouds, one may say. Though, by the way, I think we heard at the time that you and Mr. Waters knew something of him?"

"Something—oh yes!" Mrs. Waters just found strength to reply.

"But not enough, I suppose, for him to say anything to you about the reasons of the quarrel—and to be sure, he left the place so suddenly, there was no time. You have not heard anything from him since, have you?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Waters; and there was a deadly sinking within her as she made the answer.

"It is altogether the strangest affair," resumed Mrs. Elkins. "It seems he went away in such a hurry that he left all his things behind him at the Brown Bear, and a day or two ago I heard that he had not even sent for them yet. So that it almost looks as if he intended to come back again, you know."

“You think so?” and the sister felt something like a ray of comfort enter her soul on finding that the apprehension by which she was so tormented had not even suggested itself to others. But immediately afterwards she remembered that others had not seen her brother as she had seen him on his way from Egerton House, and did not know as she knew what reason he had for despair.

As she meditated on these things, she was so visibly moved that visitors less well-bred than Mr. and Mrs. Elkins might probably have been tempted to put in a few sympathising words on the subject on which her mind was presumably dwelling, of her husband’s losses. But they were very well-bred, and, ascribing her agitation entirely to the pecuniary misfortunes which had befallen the family, gave themselves some pains to find something further to say about Miss Egerton and her affairs.

“I wonder how it will all turn out,” said Mrs. Elkins presently; and this time, the better to ignore Mrs. Waters’s emotion, she addressed herself partly to Emmy, who had been listening to the talk about Mr. Graham with an uneasy,

half remorseful self-consciousness which made her instinctively avoid looking up. "But I suppose the end will be that Miss Egerton will marry her cousin Randal—indeed I fancy there is not much doubt about it now."

There was one instant during which Emmy's heart seemed to stand still with affright, but in the next it was bounding with defiant indignation. How dared people choose such subjects for their idle gossip? How dared that audacious woman talk so confidently of things which she knew, and could know, nothing about? But she had been so much upset that she could not recover herself in time to reply, and it was Mrs. Waters therefore who answered, with a feeble smile which showed how improbable the suggestion appeared to her:

"I can hardly think that very likely, I must say."

"Oh! but I can assure you it is as good as certain," returned the clergyman's wife with a slight touch of pique. "Mrs. Waddilove says he is at the house nearly every day—the only visitor Miss Egerton sees at all—and we met him ourselves riding down the road yesterday, didn't we, dear?"

"Yes," said Mr. Elkins, "just outside the park gates."

Emmy did not faint, but there was a darkness before her eyes and a booming in her ears which for the while made everything external a blank—everything external, for in the midst of that inner whirl and commotion her thoughts were at work with torturing activity. So he had not been ill, he had not been called away on business—he had been riding about the country, making constant visits in the immediate neighbourhood—he had been seen only yesterday—She writhed with pain and shame as she thought of it. It was not therefore because he could not come, but because he would not; he had deliberately deserted her on finding his rich cousin free again—deserted her after those promises, those looks, that tender pressure of the hand. He was a villain then, a treacherous, cowardly, cruel villain—he whom she had trusted so, he of whom she had made such a hero, he to whom she had confided her mother's secret. Ah! that secret—who but he could have told it? The secret had been told—told almost within the same hour in which he had

learned it from her lips ; and, knowing of him what she now did, how could she doubt longer ? So it had been all her fault, then—her mother's pallid face and wasted frame, her mother's daily and hourly anguish ? What had she done ? what had she done ?

She was at last roused by having to go through the form of saying good-bye to Mr and Mrs. Elkins, who, probably finding it too much for them to keep up a conversation under such adverse circumstances, had now risen to take leave. But burdensome as she had found their presence, their absence brought no relief. She was alone with her mother, and she dared not look her mother in the face. For a moment indeed, as she heard the long-drawn sigh with which Mrs. Waters returned to her place after the departure of the visitors, she felt an impulse to throw herself into those kind arms which had so often been folded lovingly round her, and make a weeping avowal of her fault. But her fault was so great, and its consequences so dire, that she shrunk from confessing it for very shame ; she could not find courage in sight of her mother's wretchedness to go up

and accuse herself as its cause. And then there was just the possibility that she might not have been the cause after all. If she could but think so! She rose abruptly with some muttered excuse, and hurried from the room.

Oh, the fool that she had been—the weak, wicked fool! That she should have put her faith in that man, looked up to him and been ready to love him (for she had never really loved him surely)—and all just because he was rich and well-born, and paid her compliments—ah! how she saw through him now! how she saw through her own vanity and folly! And to think that for him she had used John Thwaites so badly, John Thwaites who had more worth in his little finger than that other one in his whole body—yes, and she had used him badly, very, very badly; she did not understand how she could ever have tried to pretend to herself that she had not. She had asked him for the ribbon, and how could he have done else than return it?—he had acted throughout like the man of honour and spirit and self-respect that he was. He had been too good for her, that was his only fault; and now he had found it out,

and she had lost him for ever and ever. Oh! how much evil that man had done her—how much, even if he had not really betrayed her secret. And if he had—if he had—Ah! poor mamma—poor dear darling mamma!

And here Emmy fairly gave way, and, throwing herself on her bed—she was safe in her own chamber by this time—sobbed as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER VII.

Mrs. Waters takes a Resolution.

MEANWHILE Austin had humbled himself at Mr. Podmore's feet to the very dust. For Mr. Podmore had by no means gone to meet the returning prodigal half way, but had stood firmly on the pedestal of his own dignity, sternly listening to the appeals of his penitent votary, and for a long time unresponsive to them. At first he would not even understand that Mr. Waters could possibly desire to honour him with a renewal of confidence; and when at length it was definitively explained to him that such was really the case, it was necessary to make the most abject apologies and entreaties before he could see his way to accept the proffered responsibility. But Austin was too desperate to hesitate at any amount of abjectness, and after

a while his mingled protestations of contrition for the past and of blind allegiance for the future had the desired effect. Mr. Podmore, through regard, as he said, for the memory of his late client, Mr. Waters's respected uncle, undertook to look into the state of affairs and to do the best he could.

Even after matters had reached this point, Austin was kept in that office for what looked to him a whole age, fretting and fuming in torturing suspense as to what his fate might be. Mr. Podmore had promised to give an opinion on the facts of the case, but until the facts of the case had been laid before him in the most complete and circumstantial manner he would not allow the faintest glimmer of an opinion to escape him. In vain the anxious client was constantly asking what he thought; Mr. Podmore would not let himself be one whit hurried, and kept on questioning and cross-questioning and noting down answers and reckoning up figures and striking balances till Austin was like to go mad with impatience. And even when at last, having considered and calculated till he could consider and calculate no more, Mr.

Podmore threw himself oracularly back in his arm-chair, and began to sum up the results of his deliberation—even then he by no means came to the point at once.

“Of course this case is one susceptible of great modification by circumstances hereafter to transpire, but it appears to me on a *primâ facie* view that the facts are these,” and here Mr. Podmore made a flourish in the air with a large quill pen as though drawing up an imaginary statement. “You have incurred liabilities (of no portion of which, I am sorry to say, I can hold out to you any definite prospect of being relieved) which at the most moderate computation must be some thousands of pounds in excess of your assets—that is, as I have explained, your assets taken at their present value, and with due consideration of the greater or less disadvantage of a forced sale.”

“And do you mean then——” stammered Austin, but Mr. Podmore with a majestic wave of his pen reduced him into silence while he went on :

“On the other hand, it is probable that part of the property constituting those assets is of a

kind capable of considerable improvement. When the railway is made, the land and building materials at Beacon Bay which now would have to be sold at less than their actual cost——”

“And will they have to be sold, will they?” exclaimed Austin in terror. “That’s just what I am afraid of, and yet it would be so infamously unjust, nobody surely——What! for the sake of a few trumpery thousands to take away property that in a year or two will be worth millions——Why, what are you looking at me in that way for? you know you said yourself——”

“I said the property is probably capable of considerable improvement,” returned Mr. Podmore with a shrug of the shoulders, “and I say so still. And supposing you are able to retain it, I believe it offers you a very fair chance of ultimately securing a moderate competency.”

“A competency, Mr. Podmore! Why——”

“And for that reason,” continued the lawyer, once more waving him into silence, “for that reason I am of opinion that its retention ought to be the great object of your endeavours at the present moment. The only question is”——and

here Mr. Podmore made a lunge with his pen as though probing space for an answer—"How far will those endeavours be successful?"

This was just the question which Austin wanted to get solved, and, finding that the oracle had not yet gone further than propounding it, he could only look blankly before him in mute despondency.

Mr. Podmore went on, but not so much by way of answering the question as of reducing it to a point.

"I do not think I can hold out any hope that you will be enabled to raise money by loan on the security of the estate or otherwise. It appears from what you say that half the purchase money of the property is still standing over on mortgage, and such being the case, you would hardly be able to obtain any further sum except at a rate of interest which would equally have the effect of breaking down your resources. So that evidently all hope from that quarter must be abandoned."

Austin still said nothing, only raised his eyes to Mr. Podmore's face in helpless entreaty. He could refute none of the lawyer's arguments,

and yet they seemed to point straight to despair.

Mr. Podmore paused a few seconds, so as to give his client full time to realise the situation, then resumed, bringing the finger-tips of his two hands lightly together :

"The only course which I can suggest is that I, as your legal adviser and representative, should endeavour to induce some or all of the creditors to allow a portion of their claims to stand over for two or three years at a due rate of interest. Such an arrangement seems to afford them a chance which they might not otherwise possess of the satisfaction in full of their demands, while for you it would obtain the time requisite for the partial retrieving of your position by the improvement of the Beacon Bay estate."

The light returned to Austin's eyes as he listened ; he saw an opening in the clouds just when he had least expected it.

"Of course, of course," he cried feverishly, "the very thing. Only get them to wait a little, and it will be all right—time is all I want. And they will give it me, won't they ? for their

own sakes they will be sure to give it me."

"On that point I cannot undertake to pronounce a positive opinion," said Mr. Podmore, joining and disjoining his finger-tips with slow measured beat. "It all turns on whether I shall be able to convince them that waiting will be for their own interest. But I do not conceal from you that, as the success of such an application depends in some degree on the character of the solicitor who makes it, and the confidence inspired by his personal assertion, you have one point—well, it does not become me to say exactly of advantage——"

"Oh yes! I have, indeed I have, and shall never be able to thank you enough for it. Yes, there can be no doubt, can there?—when one thinks of that, you know. Oh! you are certain to succeed, quite certain."

"I think it may not be altogether impossible," replied Mr. Podmore with modest dignity.

"Oh! the thing is as sure as anything. Why then, and so everything will come right after all. The railway is to be open within two years, and then all this will be as though it had never been."

"Your losses will then probably be in a considerable measure repaired," said Mr. Podmore, shrugging his shoulders again. "But an accession of unlimited wealth such as you appear to contemplate, I could not conscientiously lead you to look forward to."

"Not for the first year or two after the opening perhaps. But afterwards——why, it stands to reason. All the sea-frontage is mine for half-a-mile, you know, and when once the place becomes a great port——"

"Ah yes! when," interrupted Mr. Podmore, somewhat curtly. "Mr. Waters, it has been your mistake all along to be too sanguine, and I must not encourage you in it."

"But there is such a thing as not being sanguine enough," said Austin eagerly, "and that is a mistake too sometimes. And you recollect, Mr. Podmore, you always thought the railway would not be made at all, didn't you now?"

Mr. Podmore got suddenly rather red in the face, and drew himself up so stiffly that Austin with some consternation knew at once that he was offended.

"I am quite aware, Mr. Waters, that such was the impression on my mind. And I do not hesitate to say that I am still of opinion that, had the Directors understood their own and the Company's interests, the line would not have been decided on. The expense of constructing even so short a branch through such a hilly district will be very great, and it is three years since the ordinary shareholders of the Company received a farthing of dividend. But on your account I sincerely rejoice that the Directors have taken a different view of the case."

It was as much as Austin could do to contain his impatience while Mr. Podmore enunciated an argument in his estimation so utterly shortsighted and obsolete. But he saw that the lawyer was disposed to be irritable on the subject, and, remembering how much depended on keeping him in good humour at this juncture, he did not carry the controversy further. After all, it was only natural for a man in Mr. Podmore's place, having been once wrong, to wish to let himself down as easily as possible.

"I ought to be very much obliged to you for your kind expressions, Mr. Podmore," he said

humbly. "And I hope you know that any little difference of opinion which might be between us on a matter like that doesn't in the least affect my gratitude, or diminish my respect for your judgment."

Mr. Podmore bowed, still however rather stiffly, and Austin, afraid that he might have been a little too patronizing, went on more humbly still :

"I look on you in the light of a preserver and deliverer, and always should if I were to live a thousand years. You have saved me and my poor family from ruin, and I will bless you for ever."

"I will do my best for you, and that is all I can say," returned Mr. Podmore, more graciously this time. "But you must remember that nothing has been done yet."

"Oh! but I am not afraid; when a man like you takes a thing in hand, it is as good as done already. A little time is all I want, and when it is known that you are acting for me—a person so universally respected and looked up to——"

"I should not wonder but that I may be able

to do something," said Mr. Podmore with increasing urbanity. "And now perhaps—" here he looked at his watch—"as the case is one in which some step ought to be taken with as little delay as possible, and I am pressed with a great many other matters——"

"Ah yes! to be sure, your valuable time—— I beg your pardon for trespassing so long," said Austin, rising in great haste. He had never been hurried out of that office in former times, but it did not occur to him to feel aggrieved; hardly anything could have made him feel aggrieved with Mr. Podmore to-day. For though there might have been a little instinctive flattery in what he had said just now, he did most genuinely regard Mr. Podmore as a benefactor who had snatched him as a brand from the burning. "Good afternoon, and I'm sure if you had any idea how truly grateful——"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Waters," said the lawyer blandly, but still perhaps rather edging him out of the room. "You may rely on my doing my utmost to secure your interests."

He called a clerk to open the door, and Austin, with a few more mumbled words of thanks,

went out and took the way towards home.

The load that had lifted itself off his mind since he had passed along that same road in the morning!—so heavy it had been that now, relieved from it, he felt almost jubilant. So there was hope for him yet; he had lost much, but the means of self-recovery were to be left—at least Mr. Podmore had promised to endeavour that they should be left, and Mr. Podmore would have made no such promise without good expectation of succeeding. And if, as was almost certain, Mr. Podmore did succeed, if Beacon Bay could be but saved, why, then were all things possible. The property would improve, the lawyer himself admitted that—improve so much as to pay off all debts and yield a sufficiency on which to live comfortably into the bargain. And Mr. Podmore was so morbidly cautious, so absurdly particular to be within the mark—such an admission from him meant a great deal more than appeared on the surface. Besides, he had a direct interest in depreciating the value of the Beacon Bay investment; he had committed himself against it at first, and now would naturally make the

least of its advantages that he could—the wonder was that he had allowed so much. It was evident that he must think the capabilities of the property much greater than he acknowledged, and if he thought so with his dull lymphatic temperament, what must they be in reality! Surely then, while Beacon Bay was retained, it could not be said that anything was lost. The debts would be paid off in a couple of years, on the opening of the railway; in another year the money lost by the Anglo-Cosmopolitan would be made up; and in a year after that the further development of Waterston would constitute its proprietor the richest man in the county.

Sustaining himself with these and similar arguments, he reached home, if not exactly in good spirits, at least in a state of nervous excitement which might be mistaken for good spirits, and went straight to the room where he had left his wife and daughter.

Emmy was no longer there, but Mrs. Waters was still sitting much as she had been ever since the Elkinses went away, with her chin resting disconsolately on her hand, and her eyes fixed on

the fire in dreary contemplation. As her husband entered, she looked up, and at sight of his face a slight exclamation as of satisfaction escaped her.

"Well, Austin? You are better again?"

"Yes, I have seen Podmore, and he says that all will come right. Beacon Bay will make everything up."

"I am very glad to hear it, dear," said Mrs. Waters, to whom indeed the news for her husband's sake brought inexpressible comfort. For if ruin had really come, how would he have borne it?

"I knew you would be. Yes, Podmore is going to see me through—he will get the creditors to wait a year or two, and then, as he says himself, Beacon Bay will make it all right again. And if Podmore says so, you may know what to think."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Mrs. Waters again, but rather more absently this time. Now that her mind was relieved from present anxiety on her husband's account, another consideration had occurred to her which hardly left her any attention to give to what he was saying, and

with a sigh she turned her eyes once more towards the fire.

"Yes," continued Austin, "I always knew there was a gold mine in that property, and if I didn't know it before, I should know it now; Podmore wouldn't say as much without having good reason, you may depend. So cheer up, all's well that ends well, eh?"

There was a tone almost of gleefulness in his voice that jarred on the wife very painfully. She tried to answer, but could not, only brought forth yet another sigh.

"Why, Agnes, what's the matter? you don't congratulate me half. I really think you might try——"

"I can't help it," she pleaded, hastily wiping her eyes. "I was thinking——"

"Thinking of what?" he asked angrily, finding that she had come to an abrupt stop.

"Of Harry," she answered reluctantly, and then burst into tears.

He turned suddenly pale and cold as death.

"What of him? has he come back? has he told? My God! if he has——"

"Oh no! it is not that; how can you think

it? But I am afraid, I am afraid——He has been so long without writing, and he looked so ill——Oh! Austin, when I think of it, I am miserable.”

She wept convulsively, obliged at last to give full way to the grief which in her husband's presence she had so long struggled to conceal. Meanwhile he stood by silently and looked on, with evident concern for her distress, and yet in the midst of his concern visibly regaining composure.

“Then what do you suppose can have happened to him?” he asked presently.

“I don't know, but sometimes I think——You have no idea how he looked——like a man half dead already—he may have been taken ill perhaps, and with nobody near to nurse him——Or perhaps—he was desperate at the time, and a desperate man has so many ways——and yet I can't believe that either, it is too dreadful. But if he is living, why does he make me suffer so?”

She raised her voice at the last words, as though making frantic appeal for an answer. But for some time no answer came, Austin re-

maining wrapped in meditation. So deep was his meditation, and so different was his train of thought from that which his wife's anguish seemed calculated to suggest, that, as he shook himself at last out of his reverie, he drew something not unlike a breath of relief.

"I am very sorry, I'm sure," he said, bringing his eyes slowly back upon her. "But you will make yourself ill if you vex about it so. And you may be mistaken after all, you know."

She shook her head despairingly.

"If I could but think so! But why does he not write?"

"It is very strange certainly," admitted Austin, and there was an unwonted sparkle in his eyes as though from some suppressed excitement. "But we can be sure of nothing yet; he may be on his way back to India perhaps. Only wait patiently a little longer."

"Wait—wait—you all tell me to wait. Yes, I must wait, I must, and yet how I do not know. Oh! Austin, don't think me unreasonable—I could be very patient if only I could fancy it was as you say—let me have the slightest proof, and I could wait contentedly for

months. And is that really what you think, that he is on his way back to India?"

"It is quite possible," said Austin, with no very great emphasis, however. "There are plenty of things that may have kept him from writing; he may have had to leave in a great hurry perhaps, in some vessel just starting. Oh yes! it is quite possible."

"If it really was so!" she cried with flushing cheeks—"if really——But how can I be sure? To have to wait weeks and weeks more without knowing—how am I to bear it?" and she clasped her hands in a kind of terror at the prospect. "Oh! Austin, could you not try to find out for me? If he has left the country there must be some way of getting to know it, surely—indeed wherever he may have gone——Try to find out, dear Austin, try; ask some one——"

"You don't understand what you are talking about," interrupted her husband rather peevishly. "What! would you have everybody in the place know that we are inquiring about him? What would they think? And besides, who is there to ask? how could we set about it?"

She saw the difficulty, and bowed her head in despairing resignation.

"There, don't grieve about it, Agnes," he resumed more kindly; "you will only make yourself ill, and do no good. We must just hope for the best and think of it as little as possible; that is what I try to do, and of course, if there was anything wrong, I should be as sorry as anybody—of course I should."

She made a feeble gesture of assent, and said nothing. The paroxysm of grief and anxiety which had first led to the mention of her brother's name had somewhat cooled down, and the old instinctive feeling that on this subject her husband and herself were out of sympathy began to resume its sway. She hardly knew how it was, but she did not wish to say more to him of her fears, or even to receive his attempted consolation.

Perhaps Austin on his side rather desired to bring the conversation to an end also. At all events, on finding that she did not seem inclined to follow it up, he was quite ready to acquiesce.

"I think I had better go and see after a few things I have got to do before dinner—papers and so on to look out for Podmore—so if you don't mind—but indeed I dare say you'll be

more comfortable alone. I am sorry you should be so anxious—poor dear Agnes—not but what I'm just as anxious too, of course—but fretting can be of no earthly use, and you see how many other things there are to attend to. There, good-bye, and try not to think any more about it."

She answered something that sounded like a promise to obey, but it was probably made more to avoid prolonging the discussion than anything else. For no sooner did she find herself alone than, instead of acting on Austin's injunction to endeavour to think no more of the subject, she fell to musing on it so profoundly that she could think of nothing else.

A new idea had been suggested by that conversation with her husband—or rather an old one had presented itself with greater force than formerly. Could not an attempt be made to discover something as to her brother's whereabouts and what had become of him? Might it not at least be possible to find out whither he had been bound on the day of that ill-omened journey? If only the faintest clue was to be obtained, she would grudge no trouble in fol-

lowing it up ; she was ready to travel hundreds of miles if by so doing she could obtain definite news either of his hurried departure from the country (ah ! if only she could hope to find it thus !), or——of whatever else might have happened. As she thought of the exertions she might make if she had the slightest thread to guide her, she chafed so feverishly under her forced inactivity that she felt as though she could not bear it longer.

But what was she to do ? As her husband had said, who was there to ask ? How was the thing to be set about ? If she inquired about Mr. Graham too particularly, there was the danger of making people suspect in what relation he stood to her, and for her brother's sake she shrank from the betrayal of his identity almost as much as Austin himself did. Then it was very doubtful whether anybody in Chorcombe really knew more than herself. He was not likely to have spoken to any stranger of his intentions, and no ticket-clerk or railway porter could be expected to remember what had been the destination of an unknown traveller nearly three weeks ago.

There was indeed one person in Chorcombe who was not a stranger to him, a person with whom he had had a long interview within an hour of his departure. Was it possible that he might have said something to Miss Egerton of his plans? But no, it was not likely that in his desperation he would have found anything to say about the future, it was not likely even that he had so much as bestowed a thought on it. And then how could she face Miss Egerton after the scene that had passed between them at their last meeting?

Ah! but for her brother's sake she was strong enough to face anybody or anything, if only she could hope to find something to relieve this cruel suspense. And Miss Egerton, however cold or haughty she might be, would certainly tell all that she knew, could not refuse a plain answer to a plain question. Besides, being the only person in Chorcombe who was informed of Harold Maxwell's return to England under a feigned name, Miss Egerton was also the only person of whom inquiries might be made without danger of disgracing him yet further. It could do no harm then to ask her; the only question was, could it do good? Well, there was a

chance surely. It was from her house that he had gone forth on his journey that dreadful day, and it was at least possible that he might have let fall something concerning his destination—the merest word perhaps, but still something which might be found a clue. And yet it was so very improbable that he had said anything, and the visit would be so painful——

Thus for a long time Mrs. Waters sat pondering and wavering, sometimes half resolved to go to Egerton House without an hour's loss of time, sometimes shrinking from the project as involving only a useless sacrifice of feeling. But the idea, as often as it was put away, returned again on a review of the circumstances of the case, and in greater force than ever. It was not that the scheme appeared in itself more promising as she considered it, but that there was absolutely nothing else which she could do. She must either try the effect of applying to Miss Egerton, or sit still and wait as she had waited heretofore.

But the prospect of waiting was intolerable. She had therefore only the other alternative left, and ultimately she determined to adopt it.

When at last she quitted that room to rejoin her husband and daughter it was with a firm resolution, kept, however, rigorously to herself, that if another morning came and brought no tidings, she would take her way to Miss Egerton's without further delay.

CHAPTER VIII.

Randal Scores a Point.

IT was not true that a marriage between Olivia and her cousin Randal was as good as settled—so far rumour was wrong. But it was true that Randal had been of late a very frequent if not daily visitor at Egerton House—so far rumour was quite right.

In the bitterness of her despair and shame at discovering what manner of man it was on whom she had prodigally poured forth all the love of her nature, Olivia would have liked to shut herself up from sight of all the world with no single exception. But she could not exclude from her presence one who was not merely her own near relation, but moreover the person to whose vigilance she was indebted for deliverance from the snare into which she had already fallen. So

when Randal presented himself, first to beg her pardon for the revelation he had been obliged to make, then next day to inquire after her health, then a day or two after that to inquire again, then on the morrow because he happened to be passing and could not find himself so near without looking in, then in a day or two more to ask for the loan of a book which he believed to be in the Egerton House library—when he thus perpetually kept on calling on one pretext or another, she always forced herself to see him, and even to make him welcome.

And then it was not only that she knew him to have a claim on her which she was in propriety and justice bound to recognise. She felt genuinely grateful for what she could not but regard as his generosity in concealing from others the discovery which it overwhelmed her with humiliation even to think upon, genuinely grateful for the personal interest in her which his visits implied, and which, even when she found this expression of it most irksome, was not without a soothing influence on her wounded self-respect. She despised and hated herself so much for her own past weakness that it was

quite a relief to find it condoned by the continued friendship of one who, besides knowing all the circumstances of her folly, was also a member of the family on which she had been near bringing the disgrace of alliance with a thief and a forger. In brief, she felt that Randal had the right to censure and condemn her, and that she was indebted to him in proportion as he abstained from using it.

Randal saw the progress he had so rapidly made not only in his cousin's intimacy, but in her liking and esteem, and did not fail to draw from it the most favourable auguries for his ultimate attainment of the object on which he was now more than ever bent. He had too much tact, however, to startle her by any hasty overture; and at the time when, as has been seen, he was set down by the gossips of the countryside almost as her accepted suitor, no word of direct wooing had passed his lips. No word of direct wooing, for he had taken care occasionally to let fall some tender compliment or expression of more than cousinly interest by way of feeling his ground. And on the whole he was pleased with the result of these experiments; for

though Olivia never encouraged such utterances, and always showed herself in haste to change the subjects which had led to them, she did not put them down as she had been wont to do with chilling or biting retorts. It was plain that whatever might be her precise disposition towards him, he had nothing to fear from that old spirit of sarcasm and raillery which had once made her so difficult to deal with, and under these circumstances he felt emboldened to hope all things.

After a great deal of patient waiting and cautious preparation, he judged at last that the time had come for more decisive action.

"I think you understand me better than you did, Olivia," he said one day when, having made his way to Egerton House as he so often did now, he found her as he thought more than usually cordial.

"A great deal better, Randal—oh yes! I understand that you are very kind and generous, and that I have cause to be most deeply grateful. And I am grateful, you may believe that, whether I say anything about it or not" (these words were spoken very earnestly). "But you


have not told me yet where you are going to spend your Christmas," she added with a quick relapse into her ordinary tone.

She could have said a great deal more both of her present gratitude and of her remorse for injustice formerly done him, but she had an instinctive feeling that she was on ground more or less dangerous, and, hardly knowing why, preferred to shift it if possible.

She was not allowed to shift it so easily, however, for he went on, taking no notice of her last remark :

"Then if circumstances are so much changed, you cannot blame me for asking again a question I have asked before—asked so often that you might think me impertinent for repeating it if the conditions of the case were not so completely altered. But at least you will not think so badly of me as that, will you, Olivia?"

"You know very well I could not think badly of you," she answered as steadily as she could, yet with an uncomfortable apprehension of what he might have in his mind which made her long more than ever to turn the conversation into another channel. But, not being able to find



anything to say which might have that effect, she proceeded with a kind of desperate courage to demand :

“What question is it ?”

“Can you not guess, Olivia ?” and he threw a pathos into his voice and look which left no further doubt as to his drift. “A very simple question, and yet one on the answer to which my whole happiness depends. Will you be mine ?”

Olivia had had a sort of presentiment that something like this might be coming, and yet she was surprised—so much surprised that for a while she was wholly incapable of making answer. It seemed to her almost incredible that after what had happened he could still seriously wish that she should be his wife—she who by his timely interference had been so lately saved from making herself a public laughing-stock, she whom he knew to have lavished all the love she had to give on a returned felon. The sundry tender expressions that from time to time he had let fall had indeed occasionally suggested to her that there might be some danger of a renewal of his suit, only on reflection the idea

had always seemed so preposterous that she preferred to ascribe all unwelcome symptoms to a good-natured desire of applying balm to her lacerated self-esteem. Yet here he was, not paying merely empty compliments, but actually making formal demand for her hand, the hand which only a few weeks ago had been pledged so unworthily that she shrank with pain and shame at the recollection. She could hardly believe her ears.

“Olivia, will you not answer? You are not angry, surely?”

He put out his hand to take hers, but she drew it hastily away.

“Not angry—I have no right of course; but so much surprised——Please do not say anything more about it, Randal; it grieves me more than I can express.”

She was indeed very much pained by what he had said, and yet even in speaking she was conscious that in some slight degree she had been gratified too. It was a kind of comfort to find that she had not irredeemably lost caste in the estimation of one who was acquainted with all that was ludicrous and humiliating in her short-lived romance.

"And why should you be grieved? Have you so little regard for me then?"

"It is just because I have a regard for you that I am grieved. Pray, pray say no more; you know very well that it can never be."

"Why should it never be?" he persisted. "You have some regard for me, you say, then what reason——"

"Yes, regard, but not——Forgive me, Randal, and don't think me ungrateful, for I am not—but you are only paining me and yourself for nothing. I thank you very much, but it is impossible, quite impossible."

He looked at her scrutinizingly, and understood that she was very much in earnest. But he had persevered too long to be willing to give up now.

"Oh, that man!" he exclaimed, with a burst so abrupt as to be almost melodramatic, "the evil he has to answer for! I thought it was over, but it is not; you cannot forget him; you try, but you cannot. Ah! my poor dear wronged cousin!"

If the words were meant to sting, they answered their end well. Whether it was their

tone of implied reproach or their tone of implied compassion that wounded her most, Olivia herself could not have said, but she was wounded to the very quick. That she should be openly accused of the despicable, the degrading weakness of caring for the man still—a weakness against the bare possibility of which she was for ever jealously guarding! How dared anybody say or think such a thing of her? And yet was it wonderful, knowing as everybody did how infatuated she had been once? She had never felt the depth of her humiliation so keenly as she felt it now, never at least since the first fatal hour of discovery.

“You are quite mistaken,” she said with crimsoning cheeks, and an attempt at her old pride of manner. “I can forget, and I do. Everything connected with that time is past and done with—everything.” Then, suddenly remembering how ill the affectation of haughtiness became her under present circumstances, she let her head fall forward, and added in a choking voice: “Except the shame, and that will stay with me for ever and ever.”

He contemplated her drooping figure for a

while in silence, then, drawing his chair a trifle nearer, laid his hand on hers very kindly, not however exactly repeating his attempt to take hold of it.

“Why should you be ashamed, Olivia? You made a mistake, but it was merely a mistake of too much goodness and generosity. I am one of the two or three persons in the world that know of it or ever can know of it, and I admire and respect you as much as ever I did. My dear cousin, why should you be ashamed?”

“I have only too good cause,” said Olivia sadly. “But it is very kind of you to try to comfort me, I know, and I am grateful, believe me.”

And grateful she did indeed feel. For the very reason that she had never been less disposed to be comforted than at the present moment, she felt the attempt at comforting her to be very delicate and generous.

“Grateful! I detest the word. And as for trying to comfort you, I am only saying what I feel; you ought to know that. But the truth is, your feelings towards me are so different from mine towards you that you cannot even give me credit for them.”

With this he sighed as deeply as ever he had done in old times when his sighs had been wont to raise all Olivia's ire against him. But somehow her ire was not raised now. It was not that she believed in his professions of love now any more than she had believed in them then; she had never in her life been so little in the mood for imagining herself capable of inspiring a genuine passion. But, feeling as she did real friendship for her cousin, she was inclined to believe that real friendship for herself might be among his motives for seeking a union which doubtless also seemed desirable to him on grounds of self-interest. She could have wished that he had not renewed his suit at all, but she could not impute to him as an offence that, having renewed it, he still pleaded it in conventional suitor's language. On the contrary, she felt that in framing his new addresses so precisely on the model of the old, he showed a disposition to condone and ignore the past which was very considerate.

Randal knew that he had sometimes erred by the over-ardour of his professions, and, finding that no answer was returned, began to fear that he might have done so now.

"I am afraid you are offended, Olivia."

"Offended—oh no!" she answered, with a sharp twinge of remorse at remembering how often she had been offended with him for no greater cause. "After all your kindness—how can you believe it of me? But——"

"There again—you will persist in being grateful—grateful in words at least. Oh! Olivia, if you think you have really anything to thank me for, why will you refuse me the one only reward that I care for?"

"Because I cannot consent—in justice to yourself I cannot. I do not feel towards you as I ought to feel towards you if—if I did as you wish. Forgive me; you understand what I mean."

"You mean that you do not love me?"

"Not in that way. Oh! Randal, why will you pain me so? You know what friendship I feel for you, and if I could feel more than friendship I would. But I cannot—I am very sorry, but I cannot."

And in saying this Olivia did really for the first time in her life regret that she could not bring herself to answer her cousin differently.

It was very painful to have to deny what he was so persistent in asking.

"But if I am willing to be content with friendship?" he argued. "I should be only too proud and happy to have your love, I need not say, but it will come afterwards, I am not afraid. As for blind passionate love before marriage being a necessary basis of happiness, that is all romance and delusion."

"Oh! in some cases, certainly," said Olivia, and her lip curled bitterly as she thought what a very unstable basis of happiness her own love had proved. And how blind and passionate that love had been Heaven only knew.

"You really do feel friendship for me, Olivia, do you not?"

"Oh! Randal, of course, how can you ask? But for that very reason——"

"And you esteem me a little, I hope?"

"I esteem you very much indeed, you are everything that is good and kind and considerate—a thousand times more so than I deserve. But if you would only hear me——"

"Hear me first, Olivia. Friendship and esteem—what more solid guarantees of happiness

can be sought for in marriage than these? I suppose you wish, as everybody must wish, to be as happy and useful in this world as you can, and if so how can you do better than marry a man who for years has lived in the hope of winning you, and whom you yourself confess to liking and esteeming?"

Olivia felt rather perplexed by the question. She still shrank from the conclusion to which her cousin's arguments pointed, and yet she could not deny that the arguments in themselves seemed reasonable enough.

"No, Randal, no, it might suit most people, but not me. I will try to be as happy and useful as I can, but it must be in living by myself. I have had plenty of experience of living by myself, you know; it is only going on as I began."

She attempted a smile here, but in spite of herself it was a very faint one. She could not help thinking how very different her future must be from her past—that past which, if it had sometimes been monotonous and lonely, had at least been fraught with such keen enjoyment of the sense of independence and self-reliance. She

had held her head so high then, had felt so strong and vigorous and self-confident; and now she was so crushed and broken and ashamed! Ah! the dreary hours that she would have to spend in communion with her own self-reprobation—she quailed as she thought of them.

“Going on as you began! And did you not begin by making a great mistake?” asked Randal, after a pause during which he had been intently watching her.

She quite started as she heard; the words were so exact an expression of a doubt which just then had been passing through her own brain that they seemed almost an echo. ‘A mistake—yes, truly she had made a mistake, a mistake in deeming herself strong when she was weak, wise when she was foolish, able to go alone when but for timely aid she was about plunging into an abyss. A great mistake, no question.

“Silence gives assent, is it not so?” said Randal caressingly, then, as she still did not answer, he drew nearer and in his tenderest accents whispered: “Ah! Olivia, keep silence still, and let it give assent to everything—to my happiness—to yours. I would make you happy, believe me.”

And his arm slipped round her waist as he was speaking.

She roused herself, and pushed his arm away almost rudely.

"No, leave me—I tell you I will not. This is persecution, leave me this moment."

He rose, looking very much humbled—so much humbled that Olivia, remembering the fate from which he had saved her, was seized with dismay at her own ingratitude.

"Forgive me—I did not mean it. I hardly know what I am doing. Forgive me, Randal, for indeed my heart is breaking."

And for the first time in Randal's presence she burst into tears.

He was at her side again in an instant.

"You did not mean it! Then I may still hope! Ah! Olivia, my poor dear Olivia, you will let me have the right of comforting you, will you not?"

She made no answer; she saw that she had put herself at a disadvantage by her precipitation, and she knew not how to repair the error. Besides, she was weeping still, and her tears seemed to have taken away all her energy.

He took hold of her hand, and this time she did not withdraw it; how could she without running the risk of offending him anew? She felt strangely, uncomfortably helpless; was she then really doomed to yield at last the consent she had so long withheld? Well, after all, perhaps it might be the wisest course, and it was one against which she had exhausted all her powers of reasoning.

Randal saw his advantage, and did not fail to press it.

"It is settled, Olivia, settled at last. You are mine, and I may call you so."

She felt that the toils were closing round her, and made a desperate effort to keep them from closing quite.

"Not yet, not yet, you must give me time. Let me have a day to think, and I promise that you shall have your answer."

"Let me have my answer now; say yes at once."

"No, I must have time, I must and will. Randal, let me go."

She spoke so firmly, and drew her hand from his with so much decision, that he understood it

would be dangerous to urge her too closely for the present.

“You are not trifling with me, Olivia? You are not sending me away to wait when you have made up your mind against me already? I will go, but only tell me that I have a chance.”

“You have a chance—there, that is enough. I tell you I must have time.”

“You shall have time,” he said, and moved towards the door. “Olivia, I can trust you, I am sure. You have told me that I have a chance, and you are not cruel enough to make me hope only to disappoint me. And how am I to know my fate?”

“I will write to you—perhaps to-day. But, remember, nothing is——”

“Oh! nothing is settled, I know; you are free to dash me down into despair after raising me to the highest pinnacle of hope, and I shall have no right to complain. But still I do not think you can be so cruel, I do not. Olivia, I leave you now, and remember, my whole happiness is in your hands.”

And before she had time to say another word

in deprecation of his implied confidence in her consent, he waved his hand and was gone.

Olivia's first feeling on being left alone was a kind of half incredulous consternation. Was it possible that she had actually promised to take the idea of marrying Randal Egerton into consideration, actually given him reason to speak as though he made sure beforehand of her acquiescence? What had she been doing? That within so short a time of the breaking-off of one engagement (and such a breaking off too!) she should be seriously contemplating the possibility of entering into another—what could be thought of her? what could she think of herself? She felt more ashamed and abased than she had felt yet.

Her sense of humiliation was so bitter that after a while she began to rebel against it in sheer self-defence. After all, had she so very much reason to be ashamed? had she done anything which need appear so very disgraceful and contemptible, either in her own estimation or in that of others? No doubt people would think, if they knew, that she had rooted the old love out of her heart very easily, but then

was not this exactly what she would wish them to think? Was it not something to be much more ashamed of that she should be supposed to be languishing for that—that—and she shuddered, unable to give him a name even in her own mind—to cherish his memory so that the whole happiness of her after-life was destroyed by him? Ah! surely that was the worst degradation of any which could possibly befall her.

And at this stage she ceased to argue whether she ought or ought not to be ashamed of her undertaking to consider her cousin's suit, and set herself to consider it in good earnest.

Certainly, looking at things from the prudential point of view, the arrangement which he suggested had a great deal to recommend it; nothing indeed could seem more eminently judicious or calculated to promote the welfare of both. In all external circumstances of birth and breeding and position and age, each was thoroughly well suited to the other, while on both sides there was the esteem and friendship which as he had said—and said she was sure with truth—constituted the best guarantees for

married happiness. Then moreover she was bound to him by the strongest ties of gratitude. His watchful friendship had saved her from a fate so dreadful that she dared not think of it, and to his magnanimity she was further indebted for escaping the observation and ridicule which a public disclosure of the facts must have brought with it. Again, how generous he had been in all his dealings with her, how delicately tender of her feelings, how studiously persistent in ignoring that she had done anything to forfeit his or her own respect ! Ah ! how much she owed him to be sure ! more than she could hope ever to repay.

And yet there was one way open to her of repaying something, one only way ; she might give him the hand he had so often pleaded for, and, giving it, make him master of Egerton Park. If she had not come between, Egerton Park would have been as good as his already ; it was she, and she alone, who had kept him and his all these years out of what would otherwise have been their lawful inheritance, and which they certainly would have graced far more than she had done. Was it not almost her

duty to consent to making what restitution lay in her power ?

Could it be her duty really ? she asked herself with a sinking heart, and, burying her face in her hands, she set about reviewing the arguments on the other side.

But when she tried to allege some reason for deciding against her cousin's wishes, she could not find it save in her own feelings. She preferred to go on living alone as she had lived hitherto ; that was all that she could say.

And with what face could she say so to Randal ? She preferred living alone, but had she shown herself fit for self-government ? was she indeed really fit for it—a poor weak helpless creature who had fallen into the first snare spread for her ? And could she even hope to be tolerably happy living alone after what had occurred ? How could she bear to know that wherever she went people would be canvassing her disappointment, as they would please to call it, whispering among themselves how the rich Miss Egerton was pining in secret for a former lover, and had determined to live and die unmarried for his sake ? And that was not

all—perhaps *he* might hear of it and think so too.

She started up as though a red-hot iron had touched her. Ah ! but he should not think so—never, never ; she would show him and all the world differently ; she would do her duty to the man who had saved her, would write that very instant—And with feverish haste she flew to her desk, laid a sheet of paper before her, and sat down pen in hand.

She had already traced the words, “My dear Randal,” and was pausing to consider in what phrase she should signify that all was to be as he wished, when the door was thrown open, and a servant appeared to announce :

“Mrs. Waters.”

CHAPTER IX.

Illumination.

OLIVIA'S first impulse on hearing the name was to gather up the paper on which those three words stood inscribed, crushing it together and huddling it out of sight with as much nervous trepidation as though she had felt herself caught in the perpetration of a crime. She was conscious of really feeling something of the sort, and immediately afterwards, ashamed and angry that it should have been so, raised her head proudly, and confronted the new-comer with a steady look of stately displeasure. The look was so freezing that poor Mrs. Waters, who already had found it a great effort to drag herself a few steps forward into the room, felt all her remaining courage evaporate, and stood unable to offer either explanation or apology.

"I had not expected the honour of seeing you again," said Olivia presently, and her politeness was so chilling that it was more repellent than absolute rudeness might have been. "May I ask to what I am indebted for it?"

She rose as she put the question; she could not sit while her visitor was standing, and she would not ask Harold Maxwell's sister to be seated in her house.

"I am very sorry," Mrs. Waters faltered with some difficulty, on finding herself thus called upon to unfold her business. "I would not have troubled you if I could have helped it—indeed I would not. But I am so unhappy, so anxious, and you are the only person——No, I have not come to ask you for anything, do not think it—only for an answer to a question. The truth is" (and here the speaker began to tremble so that she could scarcely articulate), "I have never heard anything of—of him—my—my brother, you know—never since that day, and I thought perhaps you might be able to tell me——"

"You may spare yourself the trouble of going on," interrupted Olivia with flaming cheeks.

"The person of whom you speak is a total stranger to me, and I can say nothing whatever respecting him."

"But you can say surely if he told you anything about where he intended to go," cried Mrs. Waters, clasping her hands in mingled anguish and entreaty. "Oh! Miss Egerton, do not be cruel to me. I tell you I have lost him—lost him; I do not know even whether he is alive or dead. If he told you what he was going to do—if you have any idea—for pity's sake do not keep it back."

"I recognise no right in you or any one else to trouble me with questions about a person with whom I have not the smallest concern. Still, to shorten the conversation, I do not object to tell you that I have no word of information regarding him either from himself or others. I know nothing whatever about him! and that is all I have to say."

"You know nothing about him!" echoed Mrs. Waters blankly, and an indescribable sense of dismay and disappointment fell upon her like lead. If she had reflected, she would have seen that the chances of her brother's life or death

really stood just where they were before, but she was so discouraged by this failure of her last hope that at that moment, with a pang of passionate grief and affection, she gave him up in her own mind for lost.

"I know nothing and I care nothing," replied Olivia frigidly.

A look of bitterness mingled itself with the sadness on Mrs. Waters's face.

"Ah! how unkind you are, and cold and unforgiving! To hate him like that—after being engaged to marry him—I wonder how——And when he loved you so—ah! how he loved you, to be sure! How can you? how can you?"

"I may rather wonder how you can dare to remind me of what you must know to be the one shame and horror of my life," returned Olivia with sparkling eyes. "And remember, if I really believed what you said last, I should only regard myself as more disgraced and degraded if possible than I am already."

"Degraded by his love, do you mean—by Harry's love?" and the eyes generally so mild and subdued in their light flashed as indignantly as Olivia's own. "Degraded! honoured, you ought

to say—for let me tell you, Miss Egerton, you never were honoured so much as when my brother loved you and chose you to be his wife.”

The words were uttered so emphatically, and with a face so glowing—not with mere passion, but with genuine sisterly pride and affection—that Olivia for an instant felt almost quelled. But in an instant more she was so angry with this temporary weakness that she made answer, in tones more chilling and incisive than perhaps she had ever used in her life before :

“Your ideas of honour are quite different from mine, so different that the sooner this conversation comes to an end the better. In my estimation it is not an honour, but the grossest insult that can be put upon me, to couple my name as you have done with that of a man who has committed theft and forgery, no matter how long ago.”

“He did not,” broke in Mrs. Waters vehemently, and she looked Olivia straight in the face with heaving chest and dilated pupils. “He did not, and whoever says he did is a liar.”

As Olivia heard these words, the blood rushed through her veins so impetuously that she al-

most staggered. But she knew that her interlocutor's eyes were still fixed defiantly upon her, and mastered her agitation sufficiently to ask with contemptuous coldness :

"And if he did not, how comes it that he is content to rest under the accusation?"

A kind of collapse seemed to fall on Mrs. Waters at the question; a spasm passed over her face, a shudder ran through her whole frame, and with a burst of tears she ejaculated :

"Because—because——God forgive me! I am a wretch, a poor, weak, wicked, selfish wretch."

Olivia looked on with a palpitating heart.

"What do mean by what you have said just now?"

Mrs. Waters dried her eyes hastily.

"Nothing—I don't know—that will do. It seems you cannot tell me anything, so I will go home."

"Stop!" cried Olivia, so peremptorily that the visitor, already on her way to leave the room, wavered and came to a halt. "I insist on knowing what you meant—you meant something, I suppose. What was it? I have a right to know."

“What was it—why, what should it be? I forget now what I said; I was half—There, I must go; they will be waiting for me.”

She moved quickly towards the door, but Olivia, coming forward more quickly still, placed herself in the way.

“You do not forget what you said; you know very well what it was. You pretended to believe that your brother was not guilty; you would have liked to make me believe it too if you could.” She paused, but the other only trembled and made no answer, and she went on: “But don’t think that you succeeded, don’t think that I was weak enough to be deceived for one instant. I was surprised at your audacity in trying to deny it, but of course I knew very well that he was guilty—I never doubted it. Ah! and you dare not try again to make me doubt it; you confess by your silence that he is guilty. Yes indeed, if I had not known it before, I should know it now through you.”

“He is not guilty,” exclaimed Mrs. Waters with a cry of pain; “he is the noblest, best—There, no more questions—I don’t know what I am saying. Let me go, for the love of Heaven!”

She made an endeavour to pass, but Olivia caught her by the arm almost roughly.

“You shall not go until you tell me everything. You said he was not guilty; what do you mean?”

“Don’t ask, for pity’s sake—I have said too much already. Ah! if you have any mercy, let that be enough.”

“But you must tell me—I must understand——The thing was done, and somebody must have done it. If he was not guilty, who was?”

A deadly paleness overspread Mrs. Waters’s features; her lips absolutely quivered with terror as she felt the searching gaze that fastened itself on her face. At the sight a ray of illumination flashed across Olivia’s mind.

“Your husband?” she whispered.

There was a sound of convulsive labouring for breath, then, unable longer to support herself, the poor wife slipped from Olivia’s grasp and sank into a chair, wringing her hands and sobbing in a very tempest of sorrow.

Olivia stood by and looked on vacantly, almost like a person stupefied. And stupefied

indeed she was, but as one who has been brought suddenly back from darkness into light.

CHAPTER X.

The Wife's Story.

“YOUR husband?” repeated Olivia, after an interval of silence during which various emotions had chased each other through her mind so swiftly that, like a rapidly revolving succession of colours, their general effect had been utter blankness.

“Ah! but you will not tell—have mercy for God’s sake. It was for me and the children—our poor dead children—not himself. Ah! he was so poor, so sorely tempted—you can never know.”

“But if he did it, how came another person to be accused?” severely demanded Olivia; then, before there was time to answer, she added with a keen searching look of suspicion: “And how came that other person to let himself be accused?”

"He did not know it at first; he thought he was only shielding us, and afterwards he was too generous——Ah! dear Miss Egerton——"

"He was betrayed then?" flashed out Olivia.

"Do not be angry; only bear with me a little, and I will tell you——But oh! my poor husband—you will have mercy——"

"Tell me everything—this moment—I insist."

"I will, I will, but do not look at me like that; be a little gentle, or I cannot."

"There, I will be very gentle," and with a great struggle for patience Olivia seated herself by her visitor's side and endeavoured to set an example of external calmness. "And now tell me, how did it happen? Tell me everything from the beginning."

"It was just after Emmy was born," began Mrs. Waters in a low voice, with difficulty restraining her sobs in obedience to the authority of Olivia's look and manner—"just after Emmy was born, and when our other dear children were beginning to sicken with the fever. You know what we had to live on (we were in debt besides to some of the tradespeople at the

time), and I was very weak, and the doctor recommended me and the children all sorts of nourishing things, and the baby was to be sent to a neighbour's to be out of the infection, and there was not a farthing of money in the house to pay for it all, and if we had asked anything from old Mr. Waters it would only have made him so angry that he would never have forgiven us. Ah! when you think of what Austin must have gone through then—and he had to bear it all by himself too, for I was to be kept very quiet, so that he never said a word to me of what he had in his mind. Oh! if he only had!"

She sighed bitterly, so bitterly that if Olivia had not been engrossed by an all-absorbing interest of her own she could hardly have failed to sympathise with her. But as it was, Olivia merely made a movement of impatience and said:

"Go on."

Mrs. Waters obeyed, but her voice was lower and more faltering than ever.

"So he kept on and on thinking over his miseries by himself, and at last one evening—

he told me afterwards it was just after the doctor had said I must have port wine three times a day—one evening he sat up very late, and—and—Ah! you see what I mean; well, it was then that he did it.”

“Forged something with old Mr. Waters’s signature, you mean?”

“Yes. But oh! only think how he was tempted. And you know old Mr. Waters had promised to leave us all his money, and this hundred pounds—it was only a hundred—would have been nothing to him one way or another. It was only by chance he came to find out it had been—been taken—at all.”

“Go on. You have not told me yet how any one else——”

“I will tell you now. He—Harry, you know—had just left Oxford, and was up in London about a tutorship in some family he had been introduced to. And—and—that same night that he had done it Austin sent the—the thing, you understand—in a letter to Harry, asking him to take it to Mr. Waters’s bank in London and get the money.”

“Ah yes! and so draw suspicion on himself; I see,” said Olivia with gleaming eyes.

“Ah! but Austin did not mean that—indeed, indeed he did not. He loved Harry like a brother, he did really—then; he would not have hurt him for all the world. But he knew he would be found out at once if he offered such a thing to anybody in the neighbourhood, and he thought that if he could get a stranger to draw the money in London——That was all he thought of, I do assure you.”

“Very well—let it be so. What next?”

“So he sent it to Harry, pretending it was a present he had got from old Mr. Waters on condition that I should know nothing about it, and asked him to bring the money when he came.”

“When he came?”

“Yes, it had been settled he should come down to see us on his way to Cornwall, where this family lived that he was going to. And he did come—poor Harry—and brought Austin what he wanted, little guessing of course how it was; and then next day he went off again, for with so much illness in the house we could not do anything to welcome him. Ah! I remember how he came to my room that morning

to say good-bye, and how he tried to comfort me about the children, and said he would return in a fortnight and find us all well. For he was not to go to Cornwall at once; he had a few spare days that he was going to spend on a walking excursion in Wales, and then he was to come back to us again. But he did not come back—I never saw him from that time to the day I found him sitting with you and Emmy in the drawing-room at Nidbourne. Ah! how little I knew the parting would be so long!”

She paused, weeping violently, but was soon urged forward again by Olivia, who had been listening in breathless impatience.

“And what happened next? It was found out——”

“Ah yes! so soon! Old Mr. Waters took it into his head to draw all his money out of the bank only a few days afterwards, and when he found there was a hundred pounds wrong in the accounts——ah! you know what he was, and you may think of the terrible passion——”

“But how did he get to suspect—anybody in particular?”

“A clerk came down from the bank, the clerk

who had paid the money on the—the thing—and he described the person who had presented it, and old Mr. Waters had always hated Harry because he was my brother, and guessed at once. And of course he thought that Harry had—had—done everything.”

“Well? and then?”

“And then he sent for Austin, and told him. Ah! what a day that was—I could never forget it if I lived a thousand years. I was sitting with my poor eldest boy on my knee (I was better then, but he was wasting away under that dreadful fever day by day), and Austin came in—oh! so pale—and said he had something to speak to me about. And I had to come away from my poor dying child to listen, and he told me everything, for he could not keep it from me longer—how wicked he had been, and how it must all be found out the moment Harry came back, and Harry was expected back every day. Oh! when I think of it all, I wonder how I can have lived through it! And then he went away like a madman, and never came back again all that day. I thought he had gone away to kill himself.”

"But he did not kill himself. What did he do?"

"He went along the road that he thought Harry would come back by, trying to meet him."

"Yes, and he did meet him, I understand that already. And he asked him——"

"He asked him to keep out of the way so as not to be questioned about who gave him the—that horrible paper. He told him everything——"

"I see, but not the one thing that it concerned him to know. Not that the person who presented that paper was suspected of being the person who forged it, and could only clear himself by telling the truth?"

Mrs. Waters lowered her eyes under Olivia's penetrating gaze.

"Do not be too hard upon him—my poor husband——" she pleaded. "He was thinking of me and the children—if he had been found out he would have been sent to prison, and we should have starved. Old Mr. Waters would have had no pity."

"Well, well, go on. So he—Harry" (it was the first time the name had passed Olivia's lips

since the fatal day of discovery)—“he consented to keep away, I suppose, and by keeping away confirmed all suspicions?”

Mrs. Waters breathed a half inaudible affirmative.

“But he found out afterwards what he had done?” went on Olivia.

“Yes, through the newspapers, but not for some days, and when he did he could not find it in his heart——He would have had to come out from his hiding and say it was Austin who did it, you know, and Austin had been good to him once, and given him a home when he needed one. And I was his sister too, and in such trouble, for we had just lost our boy, and the other children were following—our little girl died the same day we got Harry’s letter.”

“Harry’s letter?”

“Yes, he wrote to say that he knew now what people thought of him, that it had cost him a great struggle, but that he had made up his mind. And then he promised that for my sake and the sake of the benefits Austin had done him, he would go on as he had begun, and help us to keep the secret till the end; he would

give up for us his country and his name and everything."

"And you and your husband did not refuse the offer?" asked Olivia sternly.

"What could we do? Poor Austin—for my sake and the children's he dared not speak; and I—you would not have had me betray my husband surely? But oh! what I have suffered all these years—what we have both suffered, I mean—you would pity me if you knew."

"And he—Harry—have you never thought of what he must have suffered, bearing the burden of another man's disgrace?" said Olivia, trembling very much, partly with indignation, partly with—something else.

"Ah! it is thinking of that, and nothing but that, which has made me so miserable," cried Mrs. Waters, casting an appealing look at Olivia through her tears, as though entreating compassion. But Olivia was so occupied with her own emotions that the look was altogether lost on her, and with a fiery light of resolution in her eyes she rejoined:

"But the burden shall be taken off now. I know the truth at last, and it shall be my care

that all the world shall know it too. Ah! thank God that I shall be able to do something for him after wronging him so."

"What!" shrieked Mrs. Waters, "you would tell—Ah! no, no, for mercy's sake! My husband—you do not know—it will drive him mad."

"I cannot help that. Justice must be done, and shall be done. Ah! Harry, how could I believe——"

"But Austin will kill himself. Oh! if you have any pity—if you have ever felt a grain of friendship—And what good is it to do? There is no disgrace now; nobody here knows he was my brother—not at least if you have kept our secret, as you said you would."

"That makes no difference; I choose that he shall be able to bear his own name again, and be proud of it. And you forget that one person has known all along—the person who told me. Do you imagine I will consent to have it thought even by one man that I ought to feel ashamed where I have most cause to feel honoured?"

She made a step towards the door; evidently

she had taken her determination, and was prepared to put it into immediate execution. Mrs. Waters saw that it was so, and clutched at her dress with the energy of despair.

"Miss Egerton—stay—one moment—for his sake—my brother's. You love him, I think? Ah yes! I see you do."

"I do," said Olivia proudly; "I love him more than my own life."

"Then for his sake have mercy on my poor husband even as he had mercy. If you love him don't undo what he has done, don't let his sacrifice be vain."

Olivia did not speak, but Mrs. Waters fancied that her manner showed symptoms of hesitation, and with passionate entreaty went on:

"If you tell, it would be better that he had never been silent. Austin might have lived through it then, but now, with all his grand new friends to talk about him, and poor Emmy——Ah! I know what he would do—he would kill himself, I know he would. And then all that Harry has done for us would be undone, and worse than undone, all his suffering and self-denial wasted. Oh! could you wish

that? do you think that he could wish it?"

For a while Olivia was still mute, but her compressed lips and quivering eyelids showed that a violent struggle was taking place within her. At last she raised her eyes, and said in a clear steady voice:

"His sacrifice shall not be made vain through me. If he does not wish for his own sake that everything should be told, I will not wish it for mine, no, nor even for his. I give you my word."

"Oh! Miss Egerton, dear Miss Egerton——."

"You owe me no thanks; it is for him, and him alone. What he has done I will not undo without his wish. And if others, not knowing the truth, despise and point at me, I will glory in being despised and pointed at for his sake."

"God bless you for loving him so, Olivia!"

"Yes, he shall see that I can make a sacrifice too. Let him be looked down upon and held disgraced by all the world, let me be looked down upon and held disgraced for loving him—it will be my privilege to give up something for him after treating him as I did. But he

shall not be looked down upon either—Randal shall have Egerton Park, and I can trust him to be silent enough; it was all of me that he wanted.”

She spoke with strange contempt and bitterness; in the few minutes during which she had known of Harold Maxwell's innocence, Randal Egerton without any fault of his own had lost every jot of his laboriously acquired footing in her friendship, and even in her esteem. She paused, thinking with a shudder of what she had been so near doing that very morning, and presently resumed :

“And then we—Harry and I—shall go from England together, to India, or wherever he pleases—anywhere so that it be far enough away from all who knew us here—and live for each other and in each other; ah! what a happy life that will be! If only he will forgive me, that is.”

“If only he is living!” murmured Mrs. Waters in broken accents.

Olivia looked up in sudden fear; the words, and still more the tone of suppressed anguish in which they had been uttered, filled her with indescribable alarm.


“What do you mean? If he is living! what doubt—Ah yes; you came to ask me—you had never heard from him, you said. But what of that? It does not prove—Living!—of course he is living; how dare you try to make me afraid?”

“Because—because I am so afraid myself,” sobbed Mrs. Waters, unable longer to conceal the agony which her terror cost her.

“Afraid! why afraid? what are you afraid of?” said Olivia breathlessly. “Let me know everything—the worst—it is my right.”

“Perhaps all is well—perhaps I have no cause—But I am miserable, and I cannot help it.”

And then, with a great effort at self-composure, Mrs. Waters gave Olivia the whole history of her anxiety—how she had met her brother coming from Egerton House pale and haggard and scarcely capable of coherent speech, how he had promised to write and had never written, how she had heard that his things were still lying unclaimed at the village inn, how for one weary day after another she had waited for a scrap of news of him in vain. As she spoke, she watched Olivia intently, in the hope of finding that the



circumstances which carried such apprehension to her own mind did not appear equally suggestive of evil to another hearing them for the first time. But Olivia was listening with straining eyes, pale cheeks, and a look of intense anxiety that made the sister's heart turn cold within her.

"And what do you think then has become of him?" asked Olivia in a hoarse voice, when she had heard everything.

"I don't know—I dare not think too much. He looked so ill, so different from himself—sometimes I am afraid something must have happened to him that very day—some accident or—worse than an accident perhaps. He was not fit to be alone."

Olivia evidently understood all that was meant, for her pale face grew yet paler, and for some seconds she remained mute with dismay. After a while, recovering somewhat, she said:

"At least nothing happened quite immediately. I had something from him by post next evening."

"A letter!" cried Mrs. Waters, her eyes light-

ing up with a ray of new hope. "Ah! why did you not tell me——"

"No, not a letter," said Olivia sadly—"not a word of writing; he despised me too much for that. It was a ring I had given him once—he scorned to keep anything of mine after what I had done, and no wonder."

"And what did he say? where was he?"

"I tell you he said nothing. There was only the envelope addressed in his hand, and the ring wrapped up in a blank piece of paper inside."

"But there was a postmark, surely?"

"A postmark—yes, to be sure, a postmark!" cried Olivia feverishly. "I never noticed, but there must have been, of course. I will look now—I have it somewhere, I know."

And with trembling haste Olivia flew to a cabinet, into a drawer of which she remembered tossing the envelope and its inclosure immediately on receiving it. The very sight of such a memorial of Harold Maxwell had been abhorrent to her, and yet somehow she had not been able to bring herself to destroy it.

She had never ventured to open the drawer

since that day, and laid her hand instantly on what she wanted.

"The postmark is Southampton," she announced presently.

"Southampton!" and a gleam of joy flickered across Mrs. Waters's face. "He was on his way back to India, then? So perhaps it is true what Austin thinks: perhaps he had to leave in a hurry, and had no time——But surely he might have found some way of sending a letter afterwards. Oh! if only I could know something certain—I cannot bear this cruel doubt longer. Is there any way of knowing, do you think?"

"The thing would be to ask at the shipping offices at Southampton. And I will go to ask this very day; before I lay my head on my pillow I must have news of him."

"I will go with you," said Mrs. Waters eagerly.

"And wherever he may have gone," continued Olivia with impassioned energy, "wherever he may have gone I will follow, that I may ask him on my knees to pardon me and give me back his love. If I were to write to him and

say that I was ready to leave England and this place for his sake, I know what he would answer—that he would not accept the sacrifice, as he would call it. But if I speak to him, if I see him face to face and tell him I have decided—ah! he will not, he cannot refuse then.”

“Dear Olivia! dear sister!”

“Dear Agnes! Yes, you are my sister indeed—you are his, and I see you love him. Let us go then at once—you will go with me, I think you said?”

“Yes, to Southampton—I cannot live longer without hearing of him.”

“It will be a great comfort to have you. But you must come now—immediately—I cannot wait.”

“I will only return home and tell Austin where I am going, and then I will meet you at the station. There will be a train in about an hour, I think.”

“That is enough—I will expect you. And now don’t lose another instant—remember, if you are not there I must go alone.”

But Mrs. Waters needed no exhortation to haste. She seized Olivia’s hand and pressed it

to her lips, then flew on the way towards home with an elasticity of step which more than anything else showed that the capacity for hope was renewed within her.

Olivia went to prepare for her journey with a full heart—full to overflowing with exultant joy and tenderness, and yet also with strange gnawing anxiety. Ah! when once she should find him, how happy she would be, how proud of him, how penitent, and yet how triumphant! Surely in this world there would be no creature so blessed as herself.

When once she should find him!

CHAPTER XI.

Husband and Wife.

MRS. WATERS made her way home that day very quickly. She spent a few minutes upstairs in hasty preparation, and then, being ready for departure, descended to the library to seek her husband, not, however, without some little reluctance in the midst of her impatience. It was necessary that he should be told where she was going and with what object, and yet, as she thought of the explanation which such telling might involve, she could not help feeling some dread of the interview.

He was alone in the room, pacing up and down with slow thoughtful strides. At the sound of the opening door he came to a halt and looked round, when, seeing who was entering, he said eagerly :

"Come in, Agnes; I have good news for you. Podmore says he is pretty sure now of being able to manage them—the creditors, you know. Tovey will let half stand over on interest for three years, and as he is the principal one there is no doubt the others will do the same. Eh! that's good, isn't it?"

"Very good," said Mrs. Waters faintly, yet somewhat relieved by the momentary respite. "I am very glad to hear it."

"Glad! I should think so. And so it will come right with me, you see, after everything said and done—with me and all of us, that is."

"I hope so, dear. But"—here, with an effort to surmount her hesitation, she made a few wavering steps forward—"but I have come to say good-bye. I am going away for a day or two."

"Going away!" he echoed, staring at her blankly.

"Yes, I am going to Southampton with Miss Egerton."

"Southampton!"

"Yes, it seems that Harry went there that day, and we want——"

“You have heard of him!” cried Austin, with a sudden huskiness in his voice. “Then he is not—I mean then he is alive?”

“Ah! pray God he may be! But we know nothing yet—except that he went to Southampton that day; we are going to try to find out at the shipping offices. I hope—I hope—and yet when I think how he has kept me all this time without a letter——”

She turned her head away, overcome with returning anxiety; else she might have noticed that while she had been speaking Austin’s brow had become manifestly clearer. But presently, as he stood there meditating, his look grew troubled again, and after a short silence he asked rather unsteadily:

“Miss Egerton—did you say Miss Egerton was going with you?”

“Yes, I am to meet her at the station,” answered the wife, as calmly as she could, but with secret apprehension of what might be coming.

“But why should she care?” he asked again, looking very pale. “I thought she was so bitter——”

“People may be very bitter and repent afterwards. She was bitter once, but she loved him all the time, and it was only natural she should be softened towards him.”

“And do you mean to say that she has forgiven——”

“She is going to ask him to forgive her. If he lives and we succeed in finding him, she will be his wife.”

“You have told her?” asked Austin with a muffled cry, and his face became deadly white to the very lips, while his limbs shook under him as though palsy-smitten. “Oh! if I thought you had—if I thought——”

“Austin, dear Austin,” put in his wife imploringly.

“Have you told her? Yes or no, or I shall choke.”

“It was not my fault,” murmured Mrs. Waters in agony—“indeed it was not. She guessed it, and would not let me keep it back; if you had only heard the questions——”

“You *have* told her!” he cried, and a sudden change came over him which showed how imperfectly till this moment he had realised the

full import of his suspicions. "You *have*!" He waved his arms wildly over his head, and, staggering backwards, sank faint and powerless into a chair, where, covering his eyes with his hands, he sat making such convulsive gasps for breath that his wife flew to his side in consternation.

"Austin, no, don't be afraid; you are safe—quite safe—you are indeed. She has promised never to tell, promised solemnly. Ah! dear Austin, for Heaven's sake—No one shall ever hear—no one; she has given me her word, and you surely know her well enough to believe that she will never break it."

He did not answer, but his breathing became calmer and more equal, and she saw that she had succeeded to some extent in re-assuring him.

"Ah yes! you do believe, dear Austin, I see you do. You know how I love you, you know how it would break my heart if anything were said against you, then you may surely believe me when I tell you there is no danger. Dear, dear husband, you cannot think I would deceive you."

She knelt down, and would have pressed her cheek against his, but he shrank from her touch, saying harshly :

“You do not love me ; you hate me, and have done your best to kill me. I will not live to be pointed at, you know I will not.”

He pushed her away sullenly. She was grieved and wounded, and yet felt comforted too ; anything was better than the depth of despairing terror into which he had been sunk just now.

“You shall not be pointed at, Austin. You have nothing to fear, take my word for it—nothing whatever.”

He was evidently a good deal relieved, but he only shook his head moodily.

“It pleases you to say so,” he muttered, with a spasmodic contraction of the fingers.

“I do not say so without good cause. I tell you Miss Egerton has promised solemnly that our secret shall be hers too—not for our sake, but his ; she loves him, and she will not let his sacrifice be made vain. And what she promises to do for Harry’s sake, that you may be sure she will do.”

He made a movement of fretful impatience.

"Oh yes! for his sake—he is everything with you all. You have betrayed me for his sake, and she will betray me too."

"No, she will not, believe me she will not, but indeed I see you almost believe me already. She has expressly promised never to tell except by his leave, so you may understand how safe you are."

"I don't know about that," said Austin, half nervously, half peevishly. "He would have told long ago, I dare say, only he had not the courage to break such a promise as he made us, and if he can get somebody else to tell for him, he will be only too glad, perhaps."

"I think you might know him better than that by this time, after all he has done for us."

"After all he has done for us! And what has he done so very great, pray? He only thought at the time he was keeping back a little evidence; he did not intend to suffer himself, not he. And if he did suffer a little as it turned out, I'm sure I've been grateful enough, grateful till I'm tired, and so I tell you. I'm not going to

be down on my knees before him all my life just because he did me a favour once—and it was the least he could do for me, goodness knows, after all I had done for him first.”

“Oh! Austin, how can you speak like that—so ungenerously, so ungratefully?”

“Ungratefully—I tell you I won’t be grateful any longer, I have nothing to be grateful for. If he wished me to be grateful, why did he come back where he was not wanted? how dared he show his face among our friends to bring disgrace and ruin on our heads? Grateful indeed—I hate him.”

Mrs. Waters recoiled as though she had been struck; then, turning away, commented with mournful bitterness:

“If you can say that, I have nothing to answer.”

“Well, well, perhaps I did not mean quite that—of course I did not. But you cannot wonder much. Only to think of all the benefits I heaped upon him once, and now to be repaid by being brought to shame before all the world—my own child——”

He paused shuddering.

She looked at him reproachfully, yet half compassionately as well.

"How often am I to tell you that there is not the slightest danger? If you do not believe me, you can see Miss Egerton if you like; she will tell you the same."

"How dare you? What! ask me to see Miss Egerton—to talk to Miss Egerton about——" Again he shuddered, then, looking up with a sudden flashing of the eye, he exclaimed fiercely: "If I were to see Miss Egerton I would tell her it was all a lie."

"Oh! Austin, what is the use of speaking so?" said Mrs. Waters with pitying expostulation, but feeling a little startled nevertheless.

"But I would," he rejoined more deliberately, and, as though gaining new strength from the idea, he rose and made a few paces to and fro. "And if you don't take care what you do, I will; yes, I am not sure but that I will even as it is. My word is worth as much as yours, at all events."

"You will find she loves him far too well to believe you."

"I am not so sure of that. And even sup-

posing she does not believe me herself, she will have the sense to see that other people would believe me if she dared to come out with her story. Yes, I will. I will tell her that you did not know what you were saying, that you are so fond of him——You may contradict me again afterwards if you like, but nobody will believe you without proofs, and you know very well you have got none.”

Mrs. Waters had grown very pale while her husband was speaking, but as he ceased the colour began to return slightly to her cheeks, and she drew a long breath as though reassured.

“You are mistaken,” she answered, with a look of stern defiance quite new to her face. “I have a proof which will convince anybody, and if you do what you say I will produce it.”

He started, and fell back a step or two, looking very blank ; then, recovering himself with a visible effort, he smiled and said faintly :

“I don’t believe you. What proof?”

“The letter which you wrote to Harry when you sent him the—you know what—and asked him to bring the money for it.”

Again he started, and an ashy whiteness overspread his face. But again he controlled himself sufficiently to force his quivering lips into a smile while he articulated :

“That letter—I don’t believe you—how could you come by it? No, it is impossible—I don’t believe you.”

“You will soon understand how I came by it. Do you not remember that when Harry went away for his journey in Wales he left his things here for us to take care of?”

Austin uttered an exclamation of triumph.

“Ah! that shows what a lie you are telling. And don’t you remember that Uncle Gilbert took everything away when—when he found out? How could you have got hold of a letter or anything else? Ah! I knew it was a lie—all a lie.”

“It is all truth. Your uncle did not take everything of Harry’s away—he thought he did, but he did not. There was a writing-case which I had hidden—I did not know then what was in it, but I did not choose that my brother’s private papers should be read by that cruel old man.”

Austin did not speak, but the moisture that had suddenly started on his forehead showed how deeply he was agitated. Meanwhile his wife continued :

“And a few months afterwards, when Harry was in India, he wrote (you might remember it if you had taken notice at the time)—he wrote asking me to send him our mother’s portrait, which was in the desk he had left with us. You did not know I had the desk at all, and I did not tell you even then for fear of your uncle discovering, but as soon as I could I opened it and found the portrait, and sent it myself to Harry. And as I was looking over the papers and old letters to see if there was anything else that Harry might like to have, I came upon—what I have told you of already.”

Austin groaned, but still did not answer ; it was evident that he was only too well convinced of the truth of his wife’s statement.

“I thought of destroying it,” she went on in a breaking voice, “but I could not ; I felt that it would be like treason to take away the proof of his innocence. And yet for your sake I hated it so—I have had it in my hand two or three

times since then to tear it up, but I always stopped myself. So I kept it—I have it still—and oh! how thankful I am that it is so!”

He stood looking at her in silent bewilderment, then, shaking himself violently out of his lethargy, he sprang forward with a loud cry, and clutched her roughly by the arm.

“Give me that letter,” he vociferated, and drew her towards him so fiercely that she blenched with pain and fear. “That letter—that letter instantly!”

She felt herself tremble from head to foot, but, summoning all her strength, looked him steadily in the face, and with apparent calmness answered:

“No. You may kill me if you like, but while I live that letter you shall not have.”

He tightened his grasp yet further, and glared at her with such an aspect of maniacal fury that she was ready to swoon with terror—terror for him yet more than for herself. But still she looked at him unflinchingly, and in a moment more he relaxed his hold, and, reeling like a drunken man, retreated a few steps backwards to the table, leaning heavily against it to save

himself from falling. She felt as though they had both escaped some dire impending calamity.

She waited a little to recover breath, then, seeing him still stand as one whose whole strength of body and mind is shattered, said soothingly :

“ You have no cause to be afraid. I do not choose to give you that letter because I should feel that I was doing a wrong to Harry, but it will never be seen by any one except through your own fault. If you are only content to trust, everything will be as though no scrap of proof were in existence, and after what I have said you may be content to trust, surely. Miss Egerton has promised never to tell what she knows except with Harry’s permission, and even if he lives and if we find him you may be sure that his permission will never be given.”

The words were uttered with a tranquil deliberation more calculated than perhaps anything else to appease violent unreasoning agitation, and even as she spoke she had the satisfaction of seeing him become calmer. His breath came and went more regularly, he took his hands

from the table and stood erect an instant as though to test his strength, then, feebly indeed, but no longer reeling as before, moved to a chair and seated himself with an air almost of composure.

"Has any one besides you ever seen it?" he asked presently.

"No one, I declare to you no one," said Mrs. Waters emphatically, only too glad to be able to answer something to reassure him. "No one has so much as seen the outside of the desk where it is kept—except indeed once Emmy," she added, correcting herself.

"Emmy! But you did not tell Emmy what——"

"How can you think of such a thing? She only saw the desk, and I did not even tell her whom it had belonged to."

He seemed relieved, and remained silent a little time as though reflecting; it was manifest that he was fast regaining his self-possession.

"I am very glad to hear you have been so careful, Agnes. And this desk, where do you keep it then?"

He looked up keenly as he put the question,

so keenly that, hardly knowing why, his wife suppressed the straightforward answer which was already almost on her tongue, and responded evasively :

“I keep it where it is quite safe, you need not be afraid. But I must go now ; we have to be in Southampton this evening.”

“Where is the hurry ? Stay a little longer ; I want to ask you——”

She stopped him hastily, with an instinctive avoidance of interrogation.

“I cannot wait. Miss Egerton wants me to help her to find out about Harry. She is impatient—and I am impatient too.”

She moved forward to leave the room. Austin half rose from his chair as though to detain her, but he found himself weaker than he expected, and fell back again.

“I believe you care for that man more than you do for me,” he muttered querulously as she passed him.

She said nothing, but went straight to the door. The patient forbearance with which her love and her pity had so long inspired her had at last well-nigh given way to contempt for

his selfishness and cowardice, and at that moment she was conscious of a coldness towards him such as she had never felt before—such coldness that, as she heard him accuse her of caring for her brother more than for himself, something rebellious rose up within her and told her that he was right. Had not her brother deserved far more at her hands?

She had already opened the door, and with this rebellious feeling at her heart was in the act of passing out of the room, when an accidental look round showed her the broken-down figure of her husband sitting despondingly where she had left him, with the light shining full on his scant grizzled hair, and on that furrowed brow which she remembered so smooth and joyous. At the sight there came over her an irresistible impulse of self-reproachful tenderness. She turned quickly back, and, going up to him almost before he was aware of it, cast her arms fondly round him and pressed a kiss on his cheek.

“Dear Austin, say good-bye to me. You know I love you better than any creature in the world.”

As he felt her embrace he drew her towards him, and kissed her passionately.

“Good-bye,” he said, and this time his voice did not sound querulously, but was more like her husband’s than she had heard it for months.

She could have staid with him for hours longer, but every moment was of consequence, and with one last pressure of the hand she tore herself away, her heart aching with a compassionate love of which just before she could not have believed herself capable. But though that farewell had cost her a pang which she might otherwise have spared herself, she was glad that she had gone back to say it. The time came when she had still more reason to be glad.

CHAPTER XII.

On the Track.

THE winter evening had long closed in when, amid a storm of wind and rain which made the station lamps glimmer with uncertain light through a hazy veil of damp that penetrated everywhere, the two fellow-travellers from Chorcombe alighted at Southampton. The journey had been very trying to both, not so much from its length as from the anxiety on which it gave them leisure to brood, and which only became more oppressive as they neared their destination. But, wearied as they were in mind no less than in body, neither felt inclined to rest. The first condition of rest was the definitive intelligence which they had come so far to seek; and, having ascertained the address of the agents from whom they would be most likely to obtain

news of the missing man, supposing them to be right in their conjectures as to his movements, they started on their way thither without delay.

Little or nothing was said between them as they drove through the wet dark streets—dark save for an unsteady flicker from lamps and shop-lights, which only served to remind them the more of the inclemency of the night and of the unfamiliarity of their surroundings. Suspense generally grows more tormenting as the time approaches for deciding it, and partly from the fatigue of the journey, partly from the gloomy aspect of everything about them—the wet pavements shining darkly under the gas-lights, the dimly seen figures of men and women hurrying along the half deserted streets in quest of shelter—both Mrs. Waters and Olivia felt the spirit of hope much less strong within them than it had been when they left home. Neither of them could have very well said what it was that she feared, but an undefinable sense of dread and despondency settled more and more heavily upon each. It has been seen how impatient they had been to make their inquiries

that evening, and yet when at last the fly stopped and they found that they were expected to alight, both were conscious of feeling that they would have liked to delay, if possible, a little longer.

But it was too late for hesitation now; the critical moment had arrived, and they were obliged to face it. Olivia was the first to descend, and, bidding the driver await their return, gave her arm to her trembling companion, whom she led forward to the place where a half-open door showed the way into an obscurely lighted passage.

Somebody whom they could not see was fumbling at the inner handle of the door as they came up. Olivia tapped gently, and immediately a round bullet head, with an upright shock of hair and sharp youthful features, presented itself in the opening.

"No admittance to-night, miss," said a juvenile but very decided voice. "Office just closed."

Olivia had been shrinking from the necessity of immediate action, and yet now the prospect of waiting till to-morrow seemed unendurable.

"We have called on very particular business,"

she said imploringly. "Pray do not send us away; we will not detain you long."

The round bullet head was shaken inexorably.

"We don't do no more business to-night. It ain't a bit of good asking."

Olivia looked at her friend in despair. What were they to do? Suddenly a bright idea occurred to her, and taking out her purse she turned once more towards the door.

"Here are five shillings for you, my good boy. Will you let us in now?"

The youth eyed the proffered coin very longingly, but still hesitated. Presently he held out his hand and said:

"I'll see what I can do for you if you like. But I don't expect it's any use."

"Try," said Olivia, and dropped the money into his hand, which instantly closed upon it very tightly.

The ladies were straightway admitted, but no further than the passage, where they were left standing while their conductor went forward to a glass door opening into the office.

"If you please, sir, here are two ladies wanting to see you on very particular business," they heard him say.

"No business done to-night," answered a voice inside—a voice which to the applicants without sounded very gruff and formidable. "Let them call again to-morrow."

"I told them so, sir, but they were so set on coming in that I thought I might as well mention it. They seem very nice ladies, sir."

"Let them call again to-morrow," repeated the gruff voice.

The boy was retiring with his answer when, on turning to leave the room, he found the two ladies confronting him on the threshold.

"Pray do not refuse us," entreated Olivia, addressing herself to a little grey-headed black-eyed man of somewhat stern and uncompromising appearance, who was in the act of locking up a huge safe as she presented herself. "We have only come to ask one question, and if you knew what suspense we are suffering——"

"The office was closed five minutes ago," was the obdurate response. "We never do business after hours."

"Please don't send us away without an answer," said Olivia appealingly. "We would have called sooner, but we have been travelling

a long way, and have only just arrived. And we are so unhappy, so anxious—both of us,” she added, with a look of tender solicitude at her companion, whose arm she felt trembling within her own.

The little man scrutinised both his visitors very attentively, but with a look so stern and unsympathising that Olivia felt all petition to be unavailing in such a quarter.

“We never do business after hours,” he repeated stolidly. “What was it you were going to ask?”

Olivia was taken quite by surprise at the question.

“There is a—a friend of ours,” she answered in sudden embarrassment—“this lady’s brother, in fact—we wish to know if he has sailed for India, for Bombay, because if not—Ah no! Agnes, pray.”

“Because if not he must be dead,” broke out the sister with a sob which she could not repress.

The little man looked at her again very narrowly, then brought back his scrutiny to bear with equal attention on Olivia.

"It is quite against the rule for us to answer questions after the hour of closing," he said dogmatically. "About what time do you think this friend of yours started?"

"About the beginning of this month. Oh! if you would only be so kind——"

"And what is his name?"

"The name is Graham," said Olivia, turning all at once from pale to red. "Oh! how are we ever to thank you!" she exclaimed, as the little man reached down a large volume and began fluttering over the leaves.

"It is quite against the rule. Graham, you say—about the beginning of this month—to Bombay." He turned over a few leaves slowly, while Olivia held her breath with suspense. "Here is the name Graham, I see—passage taken out on the 4th; would that be about the time?"

"The very day he left us!" cried Olivia, with a burst of joy and thankfulness.

"We must remember that Graham is not an uncommon name," cautiously put in the little man, noticing something of her ecstasy. "I see the Christian name is Henry; is that what you expected?"

"Yes. Oh! thank you, thank you a thousand times!"

"And the address was Petchley's Family Hotel; is that right?"

"I don't know anything about that, but the name is enough. Henry Graham—on the 4th—oh yes! we have found him, there can be no doubt."

"He is far enough out of England by this time, you must understand," said the little man, again making a benevolent endeavour to moderate what must have seemed to him her unreasoning excess of gladness. "The ship he booked by was to sail on the 7th."

"Oh! but that makes no difference; it is he, and that is enough. Dear Agnes, you are comforted now, are you not?"

Mrs. Waters did not speak a word. The load of doubt and fear which for weeks had been pressing on her so heavily was abruptly withdrawn, and she was almost giddy with joyfulness. But what she could not say her look sufficiently interpreted.

Olivia again expressed her thanks to the little man, who received them tolerably gra-

ciously, with only a muttered allusion to the rule of answering no questions after business hours. The two friends took leave, and once again found themselves in the darkness which had looked so ominously dreary a little while ago, but which scarcely looked dreary at all now.

"Where to, ladies?" said the driver, holding open the door of his fly as they prepared to re-enter.

Olivia paused; the question of what was to be their next destination had not yet occurred to her.

"Petchley's Family Hotel," she answered with sudden decision.

It was necessary that they should rest somewhere in the town that night, and she instinctively chose that the place which had once sheltered her lover should shelter her. Besides, was it not possible that there they might obtain some further tidings?

The fly rattled on through the dark streets (the same streets some of them through which it had passed before, and yet how different they seemed now!), stopping at last in front of

an open door above which were painted, in large letters lighted by a flaring gas-lamp, the words, "Petchley's Family Hotel."

Petchley's Family Hotel was a large building situated in one of the main thoroughfares of the town, not so large as to come within the category of the huge caravansaries where the guest's name is merged in his number, and the landlord's individuality evaporates in a Board of Directors, yet large enough to be quite unlike the old-fashioned hostelries where each separate guest is made to feel himself of consequence to the welfare of the concern, and is petted and fussed over on arrival and departure with a show almost of personal regard.

Mrs. Waters and Olivia, arriving at this well-ordered establishment, were not fussed over by any means, but received with a great deal of stately decorum and formality. A white-cravated middle-aged head-waiter first appeared, and ordered an underling to see after the ladies' luggage; and before the visitors had time to say that they had no luggage to see after, a sumptuous personage rustling in moire antique, who might have been a duchess, but

was only the landlady, came forward to ask what accommodation was required. On being answered board and lodging till next morning, this haughty dame retired, perhaps all the sooner that she perceived no luggage to be forthcoming, handing the visitors over to the escort of a chambermaid. If she had been a landlady of a different type, they would probably not have gone upstairs without trying to engage her in conversation about a certain recent guest of hers; but with so magnificent a person they felt that all gossip would be out of place, and, though not without a sense of disappointment, meekly followed their allotted guide.

They duly looked at the rooms awarded them, and were presently installed, as comfortably as circumstances permitted, in a large and somewhat chilly sitting-room, where the middle-aged head-waiter made tea for them, while his subordinate, down on his knees before the grate, endeavoured to coax a handful of damp sticks into a blaze.

"Shall I put any green in, ma'am?" asked the waiter at the tea-table, appealing to Olivia

as the person who had hitherto given all the orders.

"Just as you like," said Olivia carelessly; "it is all the same."

"Some parties are so much prepossessed against green tea," explained the waiter apologetically. "But for my own part I think it makes a wonderful refreshing beverage after a journey."

Olivia looked at the man more attentively than she had yet done. He was very precise and formal in his external get-up, as accorded with the dignity of head-waiter at such an establishment, but there was a weather-beaten look of long service in his face, and a general air of conciliation in his manner, which reminded one that after all he was only a fellow-creature obliged to work probably pretty hard for his living, and doubtless standing in as much awe of the superb lady downstairs as any one else. Altogether he looked a great deal more approachable than his mistress, and Olivia felt emboldened to remark:

"I suppose in this house you have a great deal to do with people on their way out to India or the colonies?"

“Oh! dear yes, ma’am, and coming home too. It is quite surprising really how many of such parties we see; as I often say, unless one witnessed it with one’s own eyes one wouldn’t hardly credit it.”

He closed the lid of the tea-pot with great elaboration, lingering still to give it a last polishing touch with his napkin; evidently he was in very conversable humour. Olivia hesitated a moment, and then ventured tremulously to inquire:

“Do you remember a gentleman of the name of Graham coming here three or four weeks ago?”

The waiter shook his head dubiously, and, giving a parting flick to the tea-pot with his napkin as though he expected to touch up his memory by the same process, answered deliberately:

“A gentleman of the name of Graham? Can’t say I do, ma’am, really. But we have so many coming and going, you see, in a house like this.”

“Oh yes! to be sure, but still I thought that perhaps—I have reason to know that the gentleman came to this hotel.”

"Oh! no doubt about that, ma'am—quite enough that you say so, of course. But you have no idea of the number of parties that come here, you haven't indeed," and the tone of the waiter's voice was positively compassionate.

"He was on his way out to India," persisted Olivia, hoping to assist her interlocutor's memory by details. "It was about the beginning of the month that he came—the 4th, it must have been."

The waiter considered very hard, but still shook his head.

"I don't know, I'm sure, ma'am. The name of Graham, did you say?"

"Yes. He can only have been with you two or three days, for he sailed on the 7th."

The waiter was evidently inclined to do his best, but still looked desponding.

"George, do you remember seeing the name of Graham on a gentleman's luggage any time this month?" he inquired of the subordinate at the fire-side.

The person addressed looked up from his sticks and reflected, apparently as much puzzled as his superior.

"The gentleman had no luggage," put in Mrs. Waters in eager correction. "He had left everything behind him."

George drew a greasy sleeve across his forehead by way of brightening up his wits, and then said tentatively :

"P'raps the lady means the gen'l'man as came one evening without any luggage, and said he was going to send for his things next day. That was this month, I think."

"Yes," said Mrs. Waters feverishly. "Tall, with dark hair and eyes?"

"I believe so," assented George thoughtfully. "And he said something about going to India, I know."

"Why, that was the gentleman that was taken ill, wasn't it?" said the head-waiter.

"Taken ill!" cried Olivia, with a pang of terror. "What do you mean?"

Mrs. Waters said nothing, but she turned pale and cold as marble.

"There was a gentleman taken very ill here some three or four weeks ago," explained the head-waiter, "just about the beginning of the month as you say, ma'am. I don't know his

name, really, but I'm pretty sure he was going to India—indeed I think when he came he said he had just been taking out his passage."

"He was ill, you say?" panted Olivia. "And what—where is he now? what—" She paused for breath, unable to frame her question more precisely.

"I couldn't say anything for certain, ma'am. The doctor was fetched as soon as we found out, and I believe he said it was something very bad, fever or something like that, for Mrs. Petchley had him moved out of the house directly—in case it should be catching, you know, and I dare say it was, for he was quite out of his mind, talking all sorts of things."

"And now?" articulated Olivia. It was all she could say, but her manner sufficiently showed the intensity of her interest.

"I am sorry to say I don't know, ma'am," was the deprecating answer. "I remember hearing a day or two afterwards that he was very ill, but there is so much to think of in this house, you see, that really——Would you like to speak to Mrs. Petchley about it?"

With difficulty Olivia made a gesture of assent.

"Go and ask Mrs. Petchley to step this way a minute, George," commanded the head-waiter, whose curiosity was by this time so far roused that he was unwilling to absent himself just as a crisis seemed to be approaching.

George left the room, and the head-waiter, perceiving that the ladies were both too much agitated to address him, and yet feeling it necessary as an excuse for his remaining that something should be said, went on :

"I'm sure I'm very sorry, ladies, to have mentioned anything to make you uneasy. But who knows, perhaps this is not the gentleman you were inquiring about after all. We will hope it was some one else who was taken ill, and I dare say it may have been."

"Tell us something more," said Olivia faintly. "You remember him, I suppose?"

"Oh yes! I remember him quite well now that I come to think. He was a tall dark gentleman just as you say, and I recollect noticing at the time that he seemed rather strange in his manner—as if he couldn't properly fix his thoughts down to anything, as it were."

"Go on. Did he say nothing about where

he had come from—nothing about his friends?”

“Nothing at all, ma’am, I am quite certain. He seemed to be very anxious about some letters that he wanted to write, for I remember him calling for pen and paper in a great hurry. But he didn’t seem to do much with it when he got it; I was in the coffee-room most of the evening, and there he was, sitting with the pen in his hand, looking first one way and then another, and never making a stroke for what I could see. And at last he got up and pushed everything away from him, just as if he couldn’t try longer. I remember thinking to myself how tired he looked, and you see the fever must have been coming on at that very time, for it was only next morning we found him with his head so bad.”

“You are quite sure then that he did not send away any letter?” said Olivia, thinking of the packet which she had received from her lover next day, and half hoping that the person spoken of by the waiter might not be he after all.

“Well, there was something or other he put in the post before going to bed, I think, for I

recollect he asked very particularly where the post-office was, and would go out himself though I offered to send. But I couldn't say if it was a letter exactly—I think it was more a little parcel or such like, for I noticed him doing up something very careful in a bit of paper; it went through my head that perhaps his luggage was locked up and he was sending the key for it."

Olivia was silent, but she felt her heart turn cold with dismay. Then it had been really he!

"These are all the circumstances I can call to mind just now, ma'am," continued the waiter meditatively, for he saw how much interested his listeners were, and wished to do his best to deserve well of them. "It is only a wonder I took so much notice as I did; but I was struck with the poor gentleman looking so ill, and was of course particularly anxious to do all in my power to make him comfortable. And I can assure you, ladies, the care I took of him until Mrs. Petchley had him removed—Oh! here is Mrs. Petchley."

A rustling was heard on the landing, and immediately afterwards the lady in moire an-

tique sailed into the room, with something in her manner which, if not exactly defiant, was at least calculated to suggest that she was prepared to stand very jealously on the defensive.

"I understand you have been making inquiries about a gentleman who came to this house some time ago suffering from an attack of fever," she said as she entered, speaking before there was time for any one to anticipate her.

"What have you done with him?" asked Olivia in an unsteady voice. "Where——" and she stopped, absolutely afraid of going on.

"I am very glad indeed to have an opportunity of seeing somebody belonging to him," was the reply, given with a great deal of dignified composure. "The expenses incurred have of course been very considerable, and as we have only had a few pounds which we found in his purse to meet them——"

"Why can you not tell me something?" interrupted Olivia impetuously. "Is he better? is he worse? why don't you tell me?"

"I really scarcely know how he may be at present," said the lady, drawing herself up with majestic resentment of this vehemence. "When

last I heard I believe he was still considered in danger, but probably if anything had happened——”

“Where is he?” demanded Olivia peremptorily. She felt partially relieved of her worst fears, but for that very reason was more eagerly impatient than ever.

“I had him removed to lodgings in the neighbourhood immediately on finding what was the matter—of course in prudence I could do nothing else. And as I was saying, I am very glad to see some one connected with him, for there was not more than thirty pounds or so in his purse, and the expenses——”

“The expenses would not have been grudged if they had been thirty times thirty pounds. Where is he? what is the address?”

“I am certain he has been paid every attention to,” said Mrs. Petchley, more deferentially than she had yet spoken. “They are very respectable lodgings, and I gave particular directions that every care should be taken.”

“Where is he?” repeated Olivia, trembling with impatience.

“21, Clark’s Buildings is the address,” an-

swered the landlady a little reluctantly. "Shall we send to see how the gentleman is going on, ma'am?"

"No, we will go ourselves," returned Olivia decisively, and she went up to offer her hand to Mrs. Waters, who, faint with agitation and alarm, had sat listening to what was being said, almost bereft of the power of moving. "Come, Agnes, let us make haste."

"Call a fly for the ladies directly," said the hostess, and then, turning towards her guests as the waiter departed on his errand, she added in tones almost of apology: "I am very sorry not to be able to give you any more positive information, but lately I have been so busy that really I have had no time—in an establishment like this, you know——But if anything serious had happened the woman of the house would have been sure to tell me. What! will you not sit down a moment till the fly comes?"

Olivia made no answer, and, holding her friend's arm pressed tightly to her side, passed out of the room without vouchsafing another look at the magnificent landlady. On reaching the bottom of the stairs they found a fly already at

the door, and in another minute they were once more on their way through the rain and the darkness ; this time, however, in a state of suspense which, though hope was largely mixed with their fear, was perhaps harder to bear than any they had suffered yet. They were about to hear definitive tidings at last, but of what kind would those tidings be ?

CHAPTER XIII.

Found.

AFTER a few minutes of mute suspense, during which nothing was heard save the rattle of wheels over the stones of ill-paved streets, the two friends found themselves entering a straight dimly lighted lane, formed by a high dead wall on one side and a row of shabby one-storied dwellings on the other. This was the row known as Clark's Buildings, and, after some trouble in finding the right house, the driver pulled up in front of No. 21, a shabby one-storied dwelling like the rest, with nothing except the fact of its being No. 21 to distinguish it from its neighbours. Here the ladies alighted, and after a little waiting were confronted by a hard-featured and somewhat angular-looking woman, who, presenting herself at the door with a candle in

her hand, let its light fall on them as fully as possible, while she inquired with rather acid politeness what they pleased to want.

Mrs. Waters turned to Olivia, who had hitherto been spokeswoman. But Olivia now said nothing; at this decisive moment, when she was perhaps close to her lover, when certainly she was about to hear tidings of him, a sense of anxious dread, mingled at the same time with something not unlike shyness, had taken possession of her, and kept her from uttering a word. She looked appealingly at Mrs. Waters, who, finding herself compelled to speak for both, asked faintly :

“ Is Mr. Graham here ? ”

“ Mr. who ? ” said the woman sharply.

“ Mr. Graham—a gentleman who was taken ill at Petchley’s Hotel ; they sent him to this house, did they not ? ”

“ Oh ! that’s what you have come about ? ” said the woman, and, perhaps because she was by this time favourably impressed by her scrutiny of the visitors’ dress and appearance, perhaps because she considered their inquiry as constituting a sufficient introduction, she became a

good deal more gracious. "Yes, this is the house sure enough, and dreadfully ill he was, poor gentleman, I can tell you."

"But he is better now?" said Mrs. Waters, and she asked the question as beseechingly as though the answer she was to hear depended on the will of her interlocutor.

"Oh yes! he is better now and doing nicely. But the trouble we have had—you wouldn't believe it hardly. I thought at one time we never could have brought him through."

For some seconds neither of the two friends was able to speak; the revulsion from fear to joy was almost more than they could bear. And even when Olivia began to recover breath after the first shock of gladness, she was still tongue-tied. The tormenting dread was gone; but that peculiar sensation of shyness remained, and had increased tenfold.

"Where is he?" said Mrs. Waters at length.

"Where? Why, in his own room to be sure, upstairs. Bless you, if you had seen how ill he was, you wouldn't think of him being anywhere else yet a while. He has got up for a bit this evening, to write some letter he was

worrying about, but it's the first time he has been out of bed at all."

Again there was an interval of silence, and then in a wavering voice Mrs. Waters asked :

"Do you think we might see him?"

"Well, I should think so, but I'll go and ask if you like. Who shall I say it is, ma'am?"


"Say that Mrs. Waters and——No, say nothing about the other lady; I will tell him that myself. Say that Mrs. Waters wants to see him—and mind, nothing just now about any one else."

"Yes, ma'am. I shall be sure to do it right."

So saying, the woman passed upstairs, and the friends were again alone. Mrs. Waters looked at Olivia, and, seeing how violently she was agitated, could not but feel some apprehension as to the effect of the coming meeting upon her brother.

"He must not know you are here at first; I will break it to him gradually. You can come upstairs with me, but you must wait outside till I call you. Do you understand?"

Olivia made a sign of assent; she was not able to do more. Just then the woman came downstairs.




"Oh yes! he will see you; it has put him quite in a flurry only to hear the name. The front bed-room door, right before you as you get to the top—but won't you let me show you up?"

"There is no need," said Mrs. Waters, abruptly passing towards the staircase. It was evident from her manner that she wished to dispense with the proffered service, and, after a brief hesitation between natural curiosity and a desire of pleasing people who seemed to be worth pleasing, the woman acquiesced, and slowly retreated towards the kitchen.

Meanwhile Mrs. Waters made her way up the narrow carpetless stairs. Olivia followed close behind, quivering with expectation in every nerve, and yet in a kind of dream all the time.

The door at the top of the stairs was standing ajar, so that, though nothing could be seen of the room itself, a dim yellow ray from within shone on the landing, yet further increasing the intensity of Olivia's expectation. Mrs. Waters made a motion to her to remain where she was, and then, pushing open the door gently, enter-



ed the room. For an instant Olivia had a vision of a barely furnished chamber, with a figure that she knew sitting at a table in the midst ; but before she was able to discern more through the haze that rose half blinding to her eyes, the door again swung upon its hinges, and she once more found herself in outer darkness, with only that dim yellow ray to light it up.

“Agnes !” said a voice within, and the sound of that voice, broken and feeble though it was, sent such a thrill through Olivia’s veins that she could scarcely stand.

“Harry! my brother! my own Harry!” cried Mrs. Waters, and then there was a confused sound of sobs and kisses, and the listener knew that the sister had fallen weeping into the brother’s arms.

For some time no word was spoken in the room, but at length the sister’s voice was heard, half drowned in tears.

“I never thought to see you again, Harry. When you did not write I was afraid——ah! you may think what I was afraid of. Oh! what I have suffered—but it is all made up at last.”

“My poor dear Agnes! but I could not help

it. I have been ill, very ill; this is the first day——And see, I was writing to you now.”

“You were! Ah! I knew you could not forget me, I knew it. And it was that which made me so miserable when I waited and waited and no letter came.”

“It was not my fault. I tried to write to you that night, but could not; the thoughts would not come—except one thought that was driving me mad. There, that will do; it will drive me mad again if I let it come back. How have you found me? What brought you down to this place—not to look for me, surely?”

“Ah! Harry, what else should it be? We knew you had gone to Southampton, and we came down—I came down, that is—to see if I could find you, and I went to the hotel where you had been, and the people sent us here—sent me here. And oh! to have found you—I hardly know how to bear the joy of it.”

“Agnes! my own Agnes! how you love me! I did not know there was any one in the world to care for me so; it makes life easier to bear to find that there is one—yes, though only one.”

The last words were spoken in a low tremu-


lous voice which made Olivia's heart ache to the very core. A wild impulse rose up within her to rush forward and tell him that he was mistaken—an impulse which was only with difficulty repressed, and not so much by the sense of shyness which had helped to keep her silent a while ago, as by the fear of harming him by showing herself too suddenly.

There was a pause, during which Olivia was conscious of a feeling of impatience which almost amounted to anger. How dared his sister hear him speak such words and not instantly undeceive him?

But perhaps Mrs. Waters had only been considering the best way of undeceiving him, for presently she said:

"Not only one, dear Harry, do not say that. But indeed you would not if you knew who has been helping me to find you."

Olivia held her breath to listen for the question which she expected that those words must elicit. But apparently he was too indifferent on the subject to care about following it up, for after some moments of silence Mrs. Waters spoke again.



"Who do you think it was that helped me, dear?"

"Austin, I suppose; it was very good of him."

"No, not Austin," and the answer was made with something like a sigh. "No, it was somebody else; can you not guess?"

"How should I guess?" he said, but his voice had all at once become very hoarse. "Who was it?"

"I think you might guess if you tried, Harry."

"Who was it?"

"Ah! surely you know now who I mean. It was Olivia."

"Olivia!" he ejaculated, with a cry so full of pain that the listener had again to make a struggle to restrain herself.

"Yes, Olivia; I went to ask her if she knew where you had gone, and——"

"You went to ask her!" he cried reproachfully. "You dared to go before her with my name in your mouth, you dared——Oh! it was cruel, cruel! When all I prayed for was to be forgotten by her!"

His voice was that of a man racked with shame and anguish. Olivia heard, and suffered

scarcely less than he, but still with an effort she kept silence, and strained her ears to listen for what her friend might answer.

"You could not be forgotten by her," she heard Mrs. Waters say, and inwardly blessed her for the words. "She loves you too well to forget you, be sure of that."

"Loves me!" he echoed, "thinking of me what she thinks!" And he laughed a laugh of such supreme bitterness that Olivia might not have been able to abstain from throwing herself at his feet to implore pardon if Mrs. Waters, alarmed by the excess of his agitation, had not made haste to reply :

"She does not think what you mean; she knows better now; she knows the whole truth. Yes, Harry, the whole truth, and she loves you with all her heart and soul."

There was a sound of convulsive breathing, and then in a low preternaturally composed voice he answered :

"I know what it is—the fever coming back. I have sometimes dreamed of this before—when I was ill—and I understand now what it means—I will not let myself be disappointed."

"Harry, no, you are in your perfect mind, and what I say is real, I swear it to you. Olivia knows everything; she loves you better even than before, and if you will not believe me she shall tell you so herself."

"Tell me herself! Ah! now I know that I am dreaming."

"You are not dreaming; she has come with me—it was she that found you, not I. She is here now—in this town—almost close at hand—within call. Yes, Harry, she is in this very house."

A moment of dead silence followed, and then his voice broke out, confused and almost inarticulate with excitement.

"Is it true? can it really—Take care, take care—if you have deceived me, I must die."

"I have not deceived you; she shall come herself and show you that I have not. Olivia!"

Olivia laid her shaking hand on the door and pushed it slowly open—slowly, for the nervous shyness had come back, and she who just before had hardly been able to keep herself from falling at her lover's feet had now scarcely courage to drag herself into his presence. And

even when the door was open she still paused trembling on the threshold, knowing that his eyes were upon her, yet at first not daring to raise hers to confront them.

“Olivia!” she heard him whisper.

She glanced up, and for an instant her look met that of those eyes whose light she remembered so well. He was too feeble to rise from his chair, but held out his arms towards her. The sight of that mute invitation was enough; with all hesitation cast aside, she flung herself on her knees before him, and was drawn passionately to his heart.

It was long before either spoke; there was no need of words even if words could have been found. At last Olivia felt the clasp which had held her so tightly partially relaxed, but it was not that she was to be yet liberated, only that she was to be more attentively contemplated than she had been hitherto. As she found how intently she was observed, she looked up with a smile half bright, half deprecating, and then discovered, somewhat to her relief, that they were alone in the room. Mrs. Waters had slipped out unperceived.

"And you are really mine again—really mine," he said, gazing into her face the while with a look of unspeakable tenderness, and smoothing the tangled hair away from her forehead, as though to convince himself by touch as well as by sight.

"If you will let me," she murmured, lowering her eyes again. "If you can only forgive me."

"Forgive you! you mean if you can forgive me. For I know how I wronged you, Olivia—I felt it at the time, and I have felt it more than ever since. With such disgrace on my name—to dare—I hate myself when I think of it."

"Harry, Harry! how can you speak so?"

"I speak what is true—I hate myself when I remember. But I loved you so—I could not give you up. And then I had promised never to say anything to clear myself—I could not do that either. To clear myself I must have accused him, and I had given him my word that he was safe."

"I know, I know, dear Harry, and you were right to keep it. And I will help you to keep it still; helping you in everything shall be my glory."

A strange shadow passed over his face.

“To keep it still! then does not everybody
—How did you find out?”

“Your sister told me; I had a right to be told, had I not? And I promised that I would always keep the secret until you gave me leave to tell it; I promised that to her, and now I promise it to you.”

A sound like a groan escaped him as she spoke.

“You are the only one then? I thought I was cleared before all the world. There, let it be,” and here she felt his arm withdrawn from her waist. “Oh! why did you come back to me?”

He covered his face with his hands.

“Harry, dear Harry, what is the matter? You are sorry that this cloud still rests on you? Then it shall rest on you no longer. I will proclaim the truth to every one who has heard the lie.”

“No,” he exclaimed, and caught her arm with sudden energy as though to hold her back.

“I am free to do it if I like, remember. It was not your sister who told me so much as it

was I who found out, and I warned her that I would not be silent unless you wished it. And if you do not wish it——”

“But I do, I do ; I promised, and it must be. My poor Agnes—I could not—after all these years——”

“It would go very hardly with her, I know ; and as for her husband, she says it would kill him, and very likely it would, and then poor Emmy——But still for your sake——”

“For my sake, no. If you have ever cared for me, don’t try to tempt me.”

“You are quite resolved then ? Ah ! I knew you would be. And I will not say but that you are right, Harry ; you do not wish to make your sacrifice vain, and I think in your place I should not wish it either. And it shall not be made vain by me, dear ; it is the business of my life to help and not to thwart you.”

She crept nearer to him saying thus, and tried to lay her cheek against his hand. But he shrank away from her almost as though he feared her touch.

“No, leave me—I cannot. Leave me, I say—now—or the parting will drive me mad.”

"The parting? and why the parting? I thought we were never to part more."

"We must. I was weak once, but I will not be weak again. Yes, we must part; you shall not be dragged down by me."

She had half looked for some such opposition on his part, so was not surprised, but only set herself with resolute love to overcome it.

"You must let me be the judge of that, Harry. And if what you call dragging me down I call raising me up, you will not refuse to raise me up, surely?"

He shook his head, and as she pressed closer to his side only made an effort to thrust her away.

"I am disgraced—disgraced before the eyes of all the world. I will not have you disgraced too."

"You are not disgraced, Harry, and if you were I should only be more determined to share unjust disgrace along with you. But you are not disgraced; your secret has been kept, and in the eyes of the world you are still Henry Graham, as you used to be."

"No, leave me; I will not be shaken. It is

enough that I am not Henry Graham, enough that my real name is one I must be ashamed of. And besides, it is known who I am; how did you come to know yourself—that letter which you showed me——”

He paused with a shudder.

“Yes, he knows—my cousin Randal—but no one else, I am certain; he found out by his own cunning, for his own purposes, but for his own purposes he has chosen not to make his discovery public. And I shall find a way to make him choose so still.”

“What! and do you think that even if only one man knows me to be Harold Maxwell, I would let you stoop to be Harold Maxwell’s wife? What do you take me for?”

Again he tried to put her away from him, but she only clung the closer.

“If all the world knew instead of only one man, I would bear what the world might say of me with pride and pleasure. But I will take care—not for my own sake, though, only for yours—I will take care that the world shall not know. Randal shall have Egerton Park—that would bribe him to greater things than keep-

ing a secret for us—and we will go to India, or Australia, or an English village, or wherever you please, and be happy together all our lives long.”

She raised her glistening lashes to see the effect of her persuasion. His lips were quivering with such evident emotion that she hoped he was about to yield, but when he saw her looking he made a perceptible effort at self-composure, and presently answered, in a voice so cold and formal and constrained that it scarcely seemed his voice at all :

“You are very good. I thank you very much for the sacrifice you would make—as much as if I were willing to accept it. But I am not so selfish as you think me.”

“Ah! Harry, how can you speak of sacrifice? Do you not know that the only sacrifice which it would cost me anything to make would be of your love, of your approval—of you? Ah! to lose you would be like losing air and sunshine, but to give up all the parks and fine houses in the world——If only you will not reject me for being poor,” she added, smiling through her tears.

“Oh! if you were! if you only were!” He stretched out his arms for an instant, as though to fold them round her, but stopped himself, and waved her wildly away.

“What! you would drive me from you, you would send me out into the world by myself to be miserable when I might be the happiest of all creatures under the sun? You pretend that it is because you will not let me make a sacrifice, but that is not the reason; it is because you will not make a sacrifice—a sacrifice of your cold cruel pride. Oh! Harry, and you say you are not selfish!”

She looked up yet again. This time his face was turned rigidly away, so that she could only see that it was perfectly pale and colourless.

“You will not even look at me? You are quite determined to cast me off, quite determined that I shall be lonely and miserable—and rich? Quite determined—yes, I see you are. Then, Harry, I will tell you something, and remember, I am quite determined too. I will not be miserable and rich, at all events—I will not be mocked by my own money. Randal shall have Egerton Park in

any case, and if you will not give me a home I will turn governess again. Well, you see how poor I shall be without you to help me—will you not have pity?”

Still he did not turn his head.

“I see how it is, you do not believe me, but I never was more resolved in my life. Egerton Park has been a burden to me ever since I had it, and if I am to be turned away by you because I have the misfortune to possess it I shall abhor its very name. I will give it up, and if you choose to let me live poor and deserted and unhappy, why, so let it be. But I do not think you will be so unkind.”

She thought she saw him tremble, and, putting her hand on his timidly yet tenderly, she went on with caressing entreaty:

“Ah yes! Harry, you love me still a little—a very little, but too well to cast me out to be miserable even though you try. When I ask you not to reject me, you will not reject me, will you?”

He turned a momentary look on her beseeching face, then with sudden passion fell forward on her neck, exclaiming:

"I cannot. God forgive me, I have not the strength."

He strained her to his heart, and for a while everything was forgotten by those two save that each loved and was loved again. It would have been long before Olivia remembered anything else, but on lifting her eyes to her lover's face a bitter expression which she saw there reminded her that to his happiness, if not to hers, there still existed a drawback.

"Oh, the wrong I am doing you!" he cried remorsefully as his glance caught hers, "the wrong you have made me do you! How shall I endure the shame of it?"

"A wrong! do you call it a wrong to give me cause to be so proud and happy? What do you mean by such a word?"

"But it is a wrong—a cruel wrong, and I know it, though that only makes it the greater. That you should be the wife of a disgraced man, and that I should suffer it!"

"How dare you, Harry? Disgraced! your only fault is that I must look up to you too much."

"I know what I am—a disgraced man. But

oh ! I never looked to feel my disgrace as I do now—and yet I thought that I felt it enough too.”

“Ah ! Harry, how little you must care for me ! Why, I feel all my sorrows lighter with you to share them.”

“If it was only sorrow ! but it is shame which you must share with me—shame. Ah ! how could I submit to have it fastened on me ?”

“Do not repent your own generosity, dear.”

“But I do repent—I cannot help it. No man has the right to part with his own good name as I have done. I thought at the time I should be the only sufferer, but see how I was mistaken !”

“I am not a sufferer, Harry.”

“Oh ! if I could have foreseen ! But I did not know at first what I was doing—I thought I was only keeping another man’s secret for him. I was a fool, but I do not think I could have deliberately let myself be dishonoured.”

“My own love, what need to excuse yourself to me ?”

“And then when I found what I had done—it seemed so hard to come forward and

“speak words that would ruin my poor sister and her family—and Austin who had once been so good to me—after they thought themselves saved—I could not do it.”

“I could not have done it either, I am sure. Dear Harry, all that you speak of is done, and cannot be undone—why not forget it?”

“Forget it! There are some things that cannot be forgotten.”

“Ah! but for my sake this must be forgotten. You belong to me now, and you owe it to me to remember nothing except that. Oh! Harry, my own Harry, why do you look so? When I could be so entirely happy, it is cruel of you not to be entirely happy too.”

“Entirely happy!”

“Yes. Can you not be happy with me to love you, Harry?”

“Can I not? Ah! how can I help it?” he murmured, and drew her close and closer to himself.

When next she looked into his face she was almost satisfied. A trace of bitterness was indeed still visible—and she felt with a pang that nothing she might say could quite remove it—

but it was mingled with such a look of rapturous tenderness as made her sure that regret for the past could not wholly mar what would otherwise have been the perfect happiness of the present, and with this assurance she was fain to rest content.

CHAPTER XIV.

Father and Daughter.

MEANWHILE the time of Mrs. Waters's absence was passing very heavily and drearily at the Laurels, where Emmy and her father, though carefully avoiding all mention to each other of the real cause of their uneasiness, were almost equally low-spirited and out of sorts. It has been seen that Austin had been left by his wife in no enviable frame of mind, and, miserable and self-tormented as he was, Emmy was scarcely less so. She knew the nature of the business which took the two fellow-travellers to Southampton, Mrs. Waters having exchanged a few words with her during the hurried preparations for departure; and not only was it this additional proof of her mother's anxiety which grieved and depressed her, but the suspicion,

now amounting in her mind to certainty, that for that anxiety she alone was responsible. As has been shown, she had been terribly afraid of this before, and now all further doubt was rendered impossible by a discovery which she had that day contrived to make.

"Did—did Miss Egerton—when you were with her just now—did she say nothing about how she had found out?" Emmy had ventured to inquire while she was assisting her mother to put a few things together for her journey.

"Nothing. She did not tell me, and I never thought of asking."

"I think it must have been as I said before," Emmy rejoined, a good deal relieved by the answer. "He—Uncle Harold, you know—he must have confessed it himself; I always thought that must have been the way of it. Oh yes! of course he must; she never could have forgiven him, as you say she has, if she had found it out through anybody else."

"You understand nothing about it," replied her mother, rather impatiently. "And she did find out through somebody else—I remember now—she spoke something about the person

who had told her—some man it must have been by what she said. But I will ask her another time.”

Emmy said nothing more, but her heart sank within her as though it could never beat lightly again. So it was she who had worked the mischief after all, she who had been the cause of her uncle’s despair, perhaps his death, of her mother’s sorrow and suspense. That man had betrayed her, there could be no doubt.

That day was the most wretched she had ever spent. She let her mother go without making any confession of her fault—how should she ever find courage to confess a fault so terrible?—but the sense of forced isolation increased the bitterness of her remorseful misery tenfold. She could do nothing but brood over her treason, and the steps by which she had been led to it—going through all the circumstances of the time with a minuteness of detail which cost her a very agony of shame. To think of the man despising her and laughing at her all the time he was leading her on—Ah! how she hated him! and yet if possible she hated herself almost

more for having been so degraded by him—degraded so that she could never know self-respect again. And to think what she might have been if she had chosen—what indeed she had been only a little while ago—adored and idolised by John Thwaites, John Thwaites whom she now felt that she could lay down her life only to have a tender look from. But she need never hope to have a tender look from him again—never anything save coldness and contempt; he had made a mistake in her, and now he had found it out. Ah! how he must have despised her that night at the ball—that night when she had thought herself so triumphant; no wonder indeed he had sent back the ribbon. And if he could only guess the full measure of her baseness—why, he would be ashamed of himself almost for ever having cared for her. Ah yes! it was all, all over now.

Thus, shut up in her own room, she pondered miserably till it was time to join her father at dinner. But when that time came, she did not find herself more cheerful in his company than she had been alone. There never was a meal

surely more dreary than that dinner, with the long white table formally laid out in centre dishes and side dishes (for not a jot of accustomed grandeur was abated), and Emmy and her father, a great way off from one another, presiding in dismal dignity at the opposite ends, watched over by the two white-headed footmen, who hovered round with noiseless tread, vying with each other in decorous stolidity of countenance and apparent unconsciousness that anything was wrong. There was little said by either father or daughter during dinner, and that little consisted of mere commonplace conventionalisms, spoken more to impose upon the footmen than for anything else. But the footmen, with all their apparent unconsciousness, were not imposed upon a bit; and, though perhaps imagining that financial causes had more to do with it than was really the case, were just as well aware of the despondency of their superiors as those superiors themselves.

It was not much of a relief even when the footmen went away and the pair were left alone at dessert. Neither was inclined for talking, and yet now that they were by themselves it

seemed necessary to say something, and something not so absolutely dry and artificial as the little remarks which had sufficed hitherto.

"How dull we seem to be without mamma!" began Emmy, after a few minutes of oppressive silence.

"Dull! yes, dull enough in all conscience," assented her father, pouring some brandy into his glass as he spoke, with so unsteady a hand that part of it overflowed. "But she doesn't care about that so long—Did she tell you what she was going away for?"

"Something about Miss Egerton and Mr. Graham—to help her to look for him, was it not?" said Emmy nervously, for she was not sure how far her knowledge might be known or approved of by her father.

"Yes, that's just it—a most absurd thing to be sure. An utter stranger—a man we know hardly anything of, at least—and the idea of going to look for him—just because he has quarrelled with Miss Egerton and has chosen to take himself off. I think Miss Egerton might have taken the trouble for herself, without disturbing people who have nothing to do with him."

Emmy saw her father's solicitude that she should not suspect in what relation Mr. Graham really stood to them, and answered cautiously:

"Miss Egerton has always been so friendly with us—I suppose she thought that for her sake we shouldn't mind, and of course mamma's company must be a great comfort. I do hope they will find him, do you think they will, papa?"

"I don't know; I—that is, I think nothing about it." He drank off his brandy, and then went on with a more assured manner: "Except that I think them fools to go wasting their time about a man who may be dead and buried weeks ago for what they can tell."

"Oh! papa!" said Emmy faintly. "But you don't really think he is, do you?"

"Well, if he isn't, why has he never written? to—to any of his friends here, you know. And then his luggage at the inn—why did he never send for it? And if it is true he went to Southampton as they seem to think—he would need his things all the more if he was going out of the country, wouldn't he? If he isn't dead, I

don't see what can have become of him, that's all."

"Oh! surely, papa—" faltered Emmy. "There are so many other things that might have happened; surely it is not likely that—that——" and she stopped, her breath almost taken away by terror.

"What! and so you think they will find him, eh?"

"Oh yes! I do—indeed I do; I cannot think anything else."

"You and I differ then," responded Austin sharply, and he poured out another glass of brandy, and tossed it down with as much energy as though he were drinking a toast.

"Oh! papa, it would be so dreadful!" said Emmy, half entreatingly.

"Dreadful! Oh yes! very dreadful of course. But whatever happens it won't be my fault, so I don't see why I should make a fuss about it."

There was a kind of fierceness in his manner which almost shocked her, giving her as it did the idea that he felt not only indifference, but strong dislike, to the person whom he was speaking of, and who, as she could not help re-

membering, was his own brother-in-law. But presently she bethought herself what a burden and disgrace that brother-in-law had from the first been to him and his, and understood that his feelings under such circumstances might not be unnatural.

“He has brought it all on his own head,” querulously went on Austin, perhaps conscious that his bitterness required some explanation. “Why did he come over to England first of all? could he not have stayed where he was well off? And what business had he to make up to Miss Egerton?—when he could not keep himself from quarrelling with her afterwards, I mean—he might have known how it would turn out. And because he has chosen to put his head into the lion’s mouth, I have got to suffer for it—all this worry, you know. I say it is very hard.”

For an instant Emmy, thinking of all that she, no less than her father, was suffering by her uncle’s means, could not help agreeing in her own mind that it really was rather hard. But then immediately afterwards she remembered the share which her own imprudence had con-

tributed to the result, and her heart was wrung anew with remorse and self-reproach.

"Ah! but they will find him!" she cried in passionate sorrow; "I hope they will, I hope! Oh! if they did not, what—I should be so unhappy!"

"You are a fool," said Austin angrily.

He re-filled his glass once more, and swallowed the contents at a single draught. He was not accustomed to drink quite so deeply—not at least at that hour of the day—but his unwonted indulgence did not seem just now specially to affect him. His hand was tremulous and unsteady, but not more so than it had been when first he sat down to dinner; and instead of looking flushed and heated, as towards evening he not unfrequently did in these times, he was singularly wan and haggard, with no trace of colour in his face save a faint red spot on either cheek. Emmy, already struck by the unusual harshness of his manner, was quite concerned as she observed him more particularly, and noticed how pale and suffering he appeared—so much concerned that for a moment her anxiety for her uncle's safety was forgotten in a new solicitude.

"You are not fretting yourself about money, I hope, papa dear?" she asked timidly. "After what Mr. Podmore has said, it would be such nonsense to worry about it any more, you know."

"Nonsense? of course it would, ridiculous nonsense—do you think I don't know that just as well as you can tell me? Why, as for money, I never was in better spirits in my life. Podmore himself says I am all safe, and you may clap on two or three hundred per cent to anything that Podmore says. Oh yes! I shall be the richest man in the county yet, see if I shan't—if only I am let alone," he added, with a sudden gnashing of the teeth and clenching of the hands that quite frightened poor Emmy again.

"Oh! papa! But it is quite certain you are to be let alone, is it not? I thought Mr. Podmore had arranged that with the different people already."

"Oh! yes, yes, of course. And so you think they will find him, do you?"

Emmy hardly knew at first of whom he was speaking, but recollected herself in time to answer:

"What! Mr. Graham? Oh yes! I think so surely. It might be a little while first, but sooner or later—I cannot doubt it."

"Can you not? Then I do."

Emmy was silent with astonishment. Could it be anxiety for his brother-in-law's fate which agitated her father so strangely? The topic was evidently very prominent in his mind, and even the fact of his taking so desponding a view in itself argued a more than ordinary interest. She felt the weight of her responsibility increased, if possible, still further.

"Will you come into the drawing-room, papa?" she said presently, by way of changing the subject. "Tea will be ready by this time, I should think."

"I cannot come to tea. I am going to be busy in the library."

"Busy again, papa! Why, you have been busy all day long. Wouldn't you like to come and have a little music?"

"No, no—no music to-night. I have something else to think of. Run away into the drawing-room by yourself, and don't worry me."

Emmy was not altogether sorry at the pros-

pect of spending the evening alone ; she felt that the effort of entertaining her father would have been almost too much for her under the circumstances. Still for his sake she made yet another endeavour to coax him into the drawing-room, but he would not come, and she had nothing for it but reluctantly to turn away.

“What will you bet that they find him?” Austin asked as she was leaving the room.

Emmy’s heart was too full to let her answer. How sure her father seemed to be that there was no hope ! And if there was no hope, how should she bear it ?

That evening for Emmy, as she sat in solitary grandeur in the drawing-room, was even more wretched than the day had been. She could make no attempt to distract her thoughts by books or work, could only sit and listen dismally to the wild gusts of wind that howled in the chimney, and the torrents of rain that every now and then rushed against the windows—brooding over her grief and her remorse. For the first time her mind was possessed by serious apprehension that her uncle might be really lost ; with all her natural hopefulness, she could

not help fearing the worst on finding that her father regarded it as so probable. And if it was so—if by her means her mother's brother had received his death-blow——ah! what should she do? how should she ever hold up her head again? And there would be none to comfort or sympathise, none to be her friend. Her father and mother would hate her and cast her off—and there was no one else now. There had been once—yes, one who would have taken her to his heart and cherished her though all the world had looked coldly on her; but she had been unworthy of him, and had lost him—lost him beyond all hope of recovery. Ah! the poor lonely deserted creature that she was and ever must be!

She sat up rather later than usual that evening, not because she was not sufficiently miserable where she was, but because the firelight and lamplight seemed after a fashion to keep her company, and she shrank from exchanging them for the dark solitude of her chamber. At last her watch told her that she had no pretext for further delay, and very unwillingly she took up her candle, and prepared to retire for the night.

On leaving the drawing-room she paused a few seconds outside the library door. She was always accustomed to say good night to her father before going to bed, and could not make an exception now, though, if there had been an excuse for doing so, she would gladly have availed herself of it. But there was none, so after a slight hesitation she tapped at the door. She was not wont to observe any such formality, but this evening she had a kind of instinct that her father might not like to be broken in upon without warning. And yet she might have known that he was not then at his desk, for there was a regularly recurring creak of footsteps from within which showed that somebody was pacing up and down the room.

"Come in," said her father's voice, and the sound of footsteps abruptly ceased.

She entered. He was standing in the middle of the room, with his face, still very pale, turned eagerly towards the door.

"Is that you at last? Why, I thought you were never going to bed. What have you been doing?"

"Nothing particular," stammered Emmy. "I was coming to say good night now."

"Good night! high time to say good night indeed. Why, it is nearly twelve."

"I shall soon be in bed now. I hope you are not going to be late yourself, papa. Have you finished your writing?"

She glanced at his desk. But it was close shut, and the table showed no signs of writing, finished or unfinished.

"My writing! Oh! of course—yes, very nearly. Have the servants gone to bed?"

"I don't know, really. Not without seeing first if we wanted anything, I should think."

"Tell them we want nothing—tell them to go directly. Now mind you do; it is quite ridiculous they should sit up so late when there is no need."

"I will if you like, papa, but I don't suppose they care. Well, I will say good night now."

"Good night, child. No, stop one minute; I want to ask you——It has just occurred to me——did you ever see——somewhere among your mother's things—not that it matters much of course—a—an old desk—a—a writing-case it was, I think?"

"There is the desk mamma always uses, you know," said Emmy, looking puzzled.

"No, no, not that one. An old thing she keeps locked up somewhere—because she thinks it so shabby, I suppose—it can't be for anything else. Come, you must have seen it, I'm sure."

"I don't think I have, papa, I don't really."

"Nonsense, you have, I am sure you have. Damn it, I tell you I know you have," he burst out angrily as Emmy still shook her head. "At least I don't mean exactly that, of course, but I am sure, quite sure. Only think a little, and you will soon remember."

Emmy did think, and a ray of recollection presently dawned upon her.

"Oh yes! to be sure—I remember quite well. A brown leather writing-case—but it didn't look so very shabby either; I recollect asking mamma where she had bought it. Oh yes! I remember now—it was the day before we went to Nidbourne."

"And—and where is it? Where did you see it?"

"It was in mamma's chest of drawers—the old one in your bed-room; she was packing up her things for moving. But I don't know if

you can get at it to-night, papa. Is there anything in it you want?"

"Anything I want—what do you mean—the idea! Well, perhaps there might be a memorandum or two that it would be a convenience to see; that's what made me ask—but it is of no great consequence. And why shouldn't I get at it to-night? is it put in another place, then?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. No, I rather think not—I heard mamma say only the other day she had done nothing to that chest since coming back. But the drawers are always locked, and I expect mamma has got the keys with her. It doesn't matter much, I hope, papa?"

"Of course not—of course—haven't I said so already? And so she has taken away her keys, has she?"

"I suppose so; at least I have not seen anything of them. Unless she has left them about by accident, or in the pocket of her dress. But you can surely wait a day or two."

"Wait! oh yes! wait a whole year if you like; it was only a matter of curiosity. There, good night; you are quite late enough already."

He stooped down and kissed the rosy mouth

which she held up to him. As he did so, she was struck by the peculiar parched dryness of his lips. She put out her hand to feel his—it was burning.

“I am afraid you are quite feverish, papa dear,” she said, still keeping hold of his hand while she looked at him with a great deal of affectionate concern. “You are certain you are not worrying about money, eh?”

“No, no, nothing about money, I promise you—*that* will come right enough. Why, haven’t I told you already that Podmore has warranted——You may make your mind easy about that, quite easy. Yes, and about everything else—I will take care—for you as well as for myself—poor dear child—I will take care. Keep up your spirits; everything will go well.”

He spoke more tenderly than usual, and stroked her head very caressingly. She nestled gratefully to his side, exclaiming:

“My own dear papa! I am so glad to hear you say so! Oh yes! everything will go well, I am certain—everything.”

“Trust me for that. Now run upstairs to bed, and don’t hinder me any longer.”

"What! are you not going to bed too, then? I thought you had done your work for to-night."

"Oh yes! so I have, of course—I am going almost directly. Don't forget to see about the servants—I hate to have them sitting up to all hours of the night like this. There, that will do—good night."

"Good night, dear, dear papa," said Emmy with a parting kiss, "and thank you for all the comfort you have given me. Oh yes! I will keep up my spirits. I have been rather out of sorts to-day with mamma being away, but things will look brighter in the morning, I am sure."

She left her father with these words, and was presently alone in her own room for the night. But in spite of her promise to keep up her spirits, she did not succeed in feeling much more cheerful than she had done all day, being indeed, if possible, more depressed since her last interview with her father even than before. What he had said was doubtless in matter very reassuring, but there had been something in his manner—something so feverish and flighty and

altogether unaccountable—which, almost unconsciously to herself, more than counterbalanced the consolation she might otherwise have felt. She tried very hard to hope for the best, but as she laid her head on the pillow that night she was still aware of a dark cloud of foreboding hanging over her, which, strive as she would, she could not shake off.

CHAPTER XV.

At Dead of Night.

AUSTIN did not do any work downstairs after his daughter had left him, but neither did he go immediately to his bedroom as she had expected. For nearly half an hour he kept walking fretfully up and down in his library, biting his nails as though with ill-suppressed impatience, and every now and then stopping to look at his watch. At length, after returning it to his pocket for the tenth time at least, he wheeled round, and instead of resuming his walk went to the door and put out his head to listen.

All within the house was perfectly dark and still. The lights in the hall and staircase were all extinguished, and Austin, straining his ears for any slight sound of movement upstairs,

heard nothing save the howling of the wind outside and an occasional rattle of the casements. Evidently the whole household was at rest.

He stepped back into the library, and took up his lamp. But it shook so in his hand that he laid it down again, and before going further opened a cupboard in the wall where stood a bottle and glass. He filled the glass to the brim, and drank off its contents with avidity, then with steadier hand locked the cupboard, once more took up his lamp, and went softly out of the room.

Still softly he crept upstairs, and, reaching the door of his bedroom, noiselessly opened it. For a moment he glanced nervously round the spacious chamber, which with its dark distant corners struck him as looking almost spectral in the dim lamp-light; then very gently he turned the key in the lock.

He did not fasten his door usually, but this time he was so particular to do so that he even took the trouble of looking to see if the key had really turned. There was another door, communicating with his dressing-room, which he

locked also, with the same precaution as the other; and then, looking once more round the room to make quite sure that he was alone, he drew a long breath of relief. It was satisfactory to feel that he was alone, and might remain alone during his own pleasure—free from the possibility of interference from the outer world. Nobody could interfere now except by his permission—unless indeed they broke open the door to get at him; and they would hardly dare to go so far as that, he thought to himself, and half smiled at the absurdity of his own fancies.

He advanced to a table in the middle of the room, and set down the lamp with a slight shiver.

He did not know how it was, but the room, which had always before seemed to him particularly comfortable and cheerful, did not look like itself this evening. Whether it was the sense of unaccustomed loneliness, or the angry gusts of wind which every now and then shook the window-frames and even stirred the long folds of the closely drawn curtains—what was the cause he could not have said, but somehow he

felt almost afraid of looking about him. It would not do, however, to yield to such feelings, and with something of an effort he turned his head towards the corner where, as he knew, stood the old mahogany chest of drawers that had accompanied the family from their first home.

As he glanced at the familiar piece of furniture—the only piece of furniture in the room with which he had associations more than a few months old, and the aspect of which had hitherto seemed almost friendly to him in consequence—as he saw it now, it was with a strange shrinking feeling such as that with which one may look on a coffin or other object connected in the mind with half ghastly, half loathsome uses. Ah! if he had only known from the first what that chest contained, if he could have guessed what lay concealed from view behind that smooth polished front—But never mind; he knew now, and better late than never.

He went forward, trembling in every limb, and, kneeling down, tried each drawer in succession. But in vain; all the drawers were locked, and no amount of mere pulling or shak-

ing could get them open. He rose and set himself to search the room for the keys.

He fumbled among his wife's things lying in different parts of the room—the combs and brushes and gloves and pins left out on the toilet-table, the veil and scarf tossed on the sofa, the morning dress hanging on the door—all the mute evidences of her recent presence and hurried departure. He would rather not have touched them if he could have avoided it; everything that was hers seemed so strangely imbued with her personality that he felt as though her eyes were following him all the time and reproaching him for his purpose. But his purpose was too firmly fixed to be moved, and he went on with dogged defiance, shaking out shawls and handkerchiefs, and feeling pockets, and lifting knick-knacks—searching indeed thoroughly in every corner.

But with all his searching he could not find what he wanted.

Again he knelt down by the chest, and, taking out his own keys, tried one after another on the lock of each drawer. But although he found two or three that passed readily enough into

the key-hole, there was not one that by his utmost force he could get to turn the lock; and after several minutes spent in fruitless labour he rose, wiping from his forehead the drops of cold perspiration that had gathered there. How that wretched wooden thing seemed endowed with stolid will to baffle him! But he would conquer, yes, he would conquer if the shining mahogany had to be splintered first into match-wood.

He was unaccountably tremulous and out of breath with his exertions, and sat down to rest a little before renewing the attack.

What a great dismal vault the room looked, with only that little reading-lamp to light it! and then those long dark curtains swinging to and fro in the wind! How strong that wind was, to be sure—it made the very lamp flicker sometimes; and the howling—he had never heard wind howl so before; one would think human voices were crying and wailing and sobbing round the house. People long ago would have said that ghosts and witches were at work; and no wonder—if he believed in ghosts and witches he would say so himself. It was just

the kind of night for evil things to come out of their hiding-places and evil deeds to be done—a kind of night on which one might fancy a murder being committed.

A murder! he quite started at the idea. He had sometimes wondered how people felt when they were committing a murder, but he thought he understood now.

And yet why should he feel so? How foolish and inconsistent it was! He was doing no wrong, only looking for an old letter—a letter he had written himself, too, and was morally entitled to recover and destroy if he pleased. His wife had said it would be like treason to destroy it, but that was nonsense. Treason, forsooth—just because that man would be deprived of the means of exalting himself, and ruining everybody else! And why should he not be deprived, why? What had he done that he was to be suffered to hold a knife to other people's throats through all eternity? He had done something, it was not to be denied, but nothing so prodigiously grand or self-sacrificing after all. Any one not an absolute monster would have done the same for a sister and a sister's husband who had

been so kind to him, and it was for the sister a great deal more than for the husband. And whatever he had done he had been abundantly thanked for—thanked at the time, and during years upon years during which he had been spoken of, and thought of, and prayed for, and looked up to as a kind of superior being.

The bondage and oppression and slavery of all those years!

Austin's whole spirit rose up in rebellion as he thought of how much the acceptance of that single obligation had cost him, tracing in his memory the entire course of his mental history ever since. What a perpetual phrasing about gratitude he had had to keep up, not to his wife merely, but to himself in the depth of his own consciousness! He had felt something just at first probably of what he had said, for he could remember that for a year or two after it happened he used to think how he should like to see the man, and thank him with his own lips. How incomprehensible it seemed now! But that desire must have soon worn off, for, a year or two after that again, there had been something said in one of the periodical letters

from India about never coming home, and he remembered that he had not been sorry. And then gradually, by slow degrees which he could not now exactly follow, he began to have disagreeable associations with those letters and everything that reminded him of the writer, and preferred to forget when he could that any such person existed. Not that he had ever admitted such feelings even in his own mind—no, he had tried to be grateful to the very last, tried to the very last to humble himself at that other one's feet, and make him out a friend and benefactor and hero—he was actually ashamed to think how he had tried.

And yet there was a kind of satisfaction too in remembering; if he had gone through so much then, he was the more entitled to regard the debt as wiped out now. Yes indeed, it was wiped out—whatever debt there had been—wiped out ten million times. He was free—free to hate the fellow if he liked—ay, and he would hate him—he hated him already, hated him so that if a wish could strike him dead that wish should be uttered.

Perhaps he was dead already.

As this thought passed through Austin's mind the room suddenly grew more dreary and spectral than ever—so much so that for some seconds he absolutely dared not look round. What if the person he had been thinking of were indeed dead, and what if the dead had the power of returning to spy the thoughts and actions of the living? What if he were not alone in that room as he had believed, but watched from some dark corner by the angry eyes of his dead enemy—the enemy whose memory he was about to rob of the last chance of vindication? How stern those eyes would look if they were really there, how they would seek to frown him down and scare him from his purpose! But he would not be scared from it; he was alive, and, being alive, could surely have his own way against any number of dead men. Still it was a dreadful thing to think of those eyes watching him.

He forced a smile; the idea was so horrible that he was obliged to take refuge in unbelief. No, the fellow was not dead; it was absurd to suppose it—if it had been so, the news would have come long ago. He was living still—living,

and perhaps at that very instant plotting to return and ruin everybody he had a grudge against—calculating very likely how he would bring forward that letter——What! and there the letter still lay waiting for him, and who knew but that he was already on his way? Ah! fool to sit there idly while the precious minutes slipped by! And with a muttered curse against his own tardiness Austin staggered to his feet once more.

This time he felt it necessary to bring some instrument to the assault, and, after looking round vainly for something more suitable, he clutched desperately at the poker. As he did so, he remembered with a kind of shudder something he had read about somebody having dashed out a man's brains with a poker the other day; but he did not put the thing down for that, only grasped it the tighter. To get at that letter he was ready to dash out a man's brains if it were needful; yes, even though the man were Harold Maxwell.

He struck the first blow with his new weapon—a heavy, well-planted blow just under the key-hole of the middle drawer. But no sooner had

he struck than he paused in consternation at the noise he had himself made. What had he been thinking of? If he went on, the whole household would be alarmed. He listened a few minutes, hardly daring to move, and then, hearing nothing but the wailing of the wind without, laid down the poker softly on the carpet, and set himself to consider a more silent mode of achieving his purpose. For as yet he had made no progress towards his end; there was a dimple under the key-hole of the middle drawer, but that was all.

Soon a new idea occurred to him.

He crossed the room towards a small cabinet which stood at the further end of it, and in which he kept all his most important deeds and papers. This he unlocked, and after a minute's search drew forth a large bunch of keys of all shapes and sizes and varieties of workmanship, or rather a collection of such bunches, being indeed the whole of Uncle Gilbert's stock, and Uncle Gilbert had locked up everything.

Thus armed, he knelt down by the mahogany chest yet again, and, choosing the most likely-looking keys of the set, began to experiment

with them on the lock of that obstinate middle drawer. The first was a failure—so was the second—so was the third—but the fourth—when he tried to turn it, there was a click as though it nearly fitted into the wards, but not quite ; he tried again with greater force, and it went round.

The drawer was unlocked.

With hands that trembled so that he could hardly control their movements, he pulled it open and began to search. A sheet of tissue paper lay on the top (what an intolerable rustle it made as he tossed it off!), and then came a quantity of children's clothes—a little worn cloth pelisse, and a boy's cap, and a tiny white embroidered robe, and other such articles, which he huddled aside almost wrathfully while he thrust his hands down to the bottom. He felt something hard and square lying there, and drew it eagerly out, but it was not what he expected—only a great book, with gay paper covers much the worse for wear, and a written label pasted outside with the inscription—"Austy's Scrap-book. From Dear Papa and Mamma."

The sight made him pause an instant in the very hottest of his search.

How well he remembered writing that label, to be sure—it was in his old office days at Liverpool, one evening when he had come home from business ; and he had been at such pains in devising flourishes and painting up the strokes ! So that was the drawer where his wife kept the things belonging to their dead children—he understood all about the little pelisse and cap now. Poor children—poor dear children—well, he would meet them all again some day—they were looking down upon him now perhaps. Ah ! what could they think of him for what he was doing ? Still he must go on ; for their sakes as well as his own he must go on. They would not wish their father to be disgraced.

He put the things back into the drawer—a great deal more tenderly than he had taken them out, even examining one or two of them with reverent curiosity. As he came to the little white embroidered robe again, he noticed that it was marked with the initials H. W.—so it had been the baby's ; the baby had been christened Harold, had been called Harry sometimes, like—like that other. Poor baby—perhaps it was almost as well——He could not have

borne to have that name perpetually shouted about the house.

He covered up the robe very quickly, and, shutting the drawer rather in a hurry, proceeded to try the same key on the one below. After a little difficulty he got it open as he had done the first, and, with hands that shook if possible more than ever, tore off the sheet of paper spread over its contents.

The first thing he saw was a woman's dress of white muslin ; or rather muslin that had once been white, for it was soiled and crushed now as though by years of hoarding. He thought at first it was some old dress of Emmy's, and was tumbling it up very disrespectfully, when his finger caught in a bunch of artificial flowers which in another instant he saw to be a spray of orange-blossom. He understood now—it was her wedding-dress which his wife garnered up so carefully ; those very flowers in which his finger had caught had risen and fallen on her bosom that morning when she stood by his side in church murmuring the responses.

Ah ! how beautiful she had looked—he remembered as though it were yesterday—and how

proud he had felt, and how determined to make her happy ! But he did not know then how that boy-brother at her side was to grow up and spoil everything—that boy who had stood so close to her, looking as pleased and holding up his head as high as if he had been a king's son instead of a poor beggar whose very schooling had to be paid for. No, truly he did not know then ; if he had, surely he could not have kept himself from committing murder on the spot.

He lifted out the dress as carefully as he could, and laid it on one side, then turned to the drawer again and saw—a brown leather writing-case.

His breath came short and thick ; for a few moments he could do nothing for sheer want of air. When he was a little recovered he seized on the writing-case with both hands, and, lifting it with some difficulty (for he still felt faint and giddy), staggered to the table and set it down.

He looked round the room, half fearful that somebody might appear to dispute his right. Nobody was there, but as he looked he was for the first time struck by a strange resemblance

between that room and the one in which he had waited to see Uncle Gilbert die, and an eerie shiver crept over him almost as though he felt himself once more in an atmosphere of death. And yet the shape of the two rooms was entirely different, and so was the furniture—he could not account for the fancy. And then there was no monotonously ticking clock to vex him here—nothing but the storm outside and the fluttering beat of his own heart.

He roused himself; there was more for him to do, and he must do it.

The case was locked, but he did not think much of such obstacles now. After vainly trying one or two keys, he found that this lock was of more complicated construction than the others had been; so he set to work in a slightly different method, taking out his penknife and sawing through the leathern flap to which the lock was attached. He was very full of ridiculous fancies certainly, for as he slowly made his way through the resisting substance he found himself wondering if the sensation was anything like that of cutting a man's throat.

In a minute more the case was open, and the

contents—a loose mass of letters and manuscripts—were exposed to view.

He plunged his hand eagerly among them, taking up one paper after another, and holding it close to his eyes almost as though he had been near-sighted—not that he was really so, but just now there was a thick film before all he saw which made it difficult for him to discern anything.

Presently a stifled murmur escaped him, and his fingers closed with feverish tenacity round a letter the superscription of which he was thus examining. He had recognised his own writing on the envelope, and he knew that at last he had found that which he sought.


He clutched at the table for support, and let himself drop into a chair that stood by, unable to keep his feet longer for a sharp cutting pain in his side which seemed to vibrate thence through his whole frame. But he held the letter as tightly as ever, and, mingled with the pain, felt a thrill of exultation as at some great victory. So he had got it into his possession at last, the only existing evidence of his shame, had got it into his possession to do with it as

he would! Ah! the delight there would be in seeing the burning paper curl and frizzle and writhe, and then fall down in crisp black ash, to be crushed and stamped out of existence under the sole of his foot!

He drew the lamp nearer and turned up the wick a little higher, then, watching the flame with almost epicurean zest, daintily took the letter out of the envelope and unfolded it.

Stop, it might be as well perhaps just to glance over the thing first, to make quite sure that he had really got what he wanted. He held the paper up to his eyes—he had to look at things more closely than ever now—and made out a few words at sight of which his heart gave a great throb of recognition that for a moment took the pain at his side away.

Yes, that was it sure enough; how well he remembered writing it—that night—after everybody was asleep—sitting in the little back bedroom of the old house—with his wife lying in the next room, and poor Austy in a crib by her bedside—the doctor had been to see them that evening, and said he could not answer for either of them. If it were not for the wind he



could almost fancy the time come back again, and there had been a little wind that night too; the sashes had rattled once and made him let a great spot of ink fall on the table; had that spot ever been washed out, he wondered? But the table stood in quite a different place to-night, and it was not the same table either—no, everything was different. Besides, nobody was in the next room now—or was she there still—could it be? why then, Austy must be there too—Austy was living yet—all the children—So it had been only a dream after all—only a dream, and everything was right again; why, had not Harry just come home with the scholarship? Hark, what was that?—not the wind—a voice—Uncle Gilbert's voice. What! does he want to come in?—no, no, don't let him, don't! If it had not been for Uncle Gilbert—Keep him out—keep him out—he shall not—Help, help! Agnes!


The last words were uttered aloud, uttered in a voice so shrill and piercing that the very walls seemed to ring with it.

But no one heard and no one answered.

CHAPTER XVI.

Daylight Let In.

EMMY'S sleep that night had been very disturbed and restless for the first two or three hours, and she did not awake next morning till it was already quite light—as light at least as was compatible with a bleak cheerless sky, still overspread with heavy leaden-looking clouds which the night's storm had failed to disperse. They were accustomed to keep rather early hours at the Laurels, Austin's frequent journeys to Beacon Bay making it necessary for him to turn the short winter days to the best account; so, immediately on discovering how late it was, Emmy rose and set about her toilet, hurrying as much as she could in order to be in time to preside at her father's breakfast. But she need not have troubled herself to make such haste,



for when she descended to the breakfast-room her father was not yet there.

The urn was brought, and Emmy made the tea and coffee very expeditiously, still rather afraid that he would appear before things were quite ready for him. But he did not; he did not appear even by the time his coffee was prepared and poured out, and after a few minutes more she thought she would go upstairs and tell him that breakfast was waiting.

But instead of being on the point of coming down as she had expected, he was evidently not even yet awake, for when she knocked at his door no answer was returned. She was just going to knock again when she remembered how tired and harassed he had looked the night before, and decided that it would be best to let him have all the rest possible. So she turned away from the door, stealing along on tip-toe lest she should have already disturbed him, and slipped softly downstairs again.


She went back to the breakfast-room, and sat down to her solitary meal, feeling it incumbent on her as a matter of usage to go through the form of taking something. But she had no ap-

petite whatever, and did little else than sit disconsolately, looking at her father and mother's empty places, and breaking infinitesimal pieces of toast into her tea.

For she did not feel nearly so reassured this morning as she had predicted. On the contrary, what with the grey sunless weather and the unaccustomed solitude of the breakfast-room, she found everything looking strangely dull and dreary, and could not keep herself from speculating dismally on the very worst that might happen as a consequence of her folly and treachery. Her poor dear mother!—that was the idea in which all her anxieties centred.

As she was sitting thus dolefully by herself, making hardly any progress with her meal, the door opened, and she looked up half expecting to see her father. But it was not her father, only a servant who came in to say :

“Master is not down yet, I think, is he, miss ? Because Mr. Podmore has just called, and wants to speak to him very particular on business. I told him master had not left his room yet, but he said he would step in and wait—he is in the library now. Would it be disturbing master if I was to go and tell him ?”



"He was so late last night," said Emmy hesitatingly; "it seems almost a pity. Show Mr. Podmore in here; I will go to papa myself if it is of any consequence."

The man withdrew, and immediately afterwards the lawyer was ushered in.

"Oh! Mr. Podmore, how do you do?" said Emmy, rising to receive the little man with a good deal of cordiality, for it was quite a relief to her to have her solitude broken in upon. "I am breakfasting all alone, you see. Pray sit down—and may I give you a cup of tea?"

But Mr. Podmore accepted neither of these civilities.

"Thank you, I have had breakfast," he answered gravely, so gravely that Emmy might have felt a little surprised if she had been in the mood for noticing such details. "Mr. Waters is not down yet, they tell me?" he added with a glance round the room.

"Not yet; indeed I fancy he is still asleep—at least he was a few minutes ago, and he was so late in going to bed last night that I did not like to disturb him. But of course if it is any thing very particular—Shall I go and tell him you are here?"

"Well, if you would be so kind, Miss Waters," said the lawyer, coughing gently behind his hand. "I have a business communication to make to him which perhaps it is better not to delay—in fact, it was my desire that there should be no delay which has made me intrude on you at this early hour. So if it is not giving you too much trouble——" and he coughed again.

If the speaker had been any other than Mr. Podmore, Emmy must certainly this time have been struck by the extra gravity of his demeanour—gravity which a slight shade of accompanying embarrassment only brought into additional relief. But then Mr. Podmore was always a little more solemn than other people, and, as has been seen, Emmy was not in an observant humour this morning.

"Is there any message I can take up?" she asked before leaving the room.

"Message! Oh no! I think it will be better that I myself——You might just mention to Mr. Waters that a circumstance has arisen with which it is necessary to make him acquainted, but that is all just now."

And then with another cough Mr. Podmore sat down to wait, and Emmy ran upstairs on her errand.

"Papa!" she said, knocking gently at her father's door, for she was afraid of rousing him too abruptly.

He did not answer, and she knocked again, a little louder than before.

"Papa dear, Mr. Podmore has just called."

Again there was no answer. She waited a second or two, and then softly turned the handle; she would go in and wake him with a kiss. But this was not to be done either, for the door was locked.

She tapped on the panels quite smartly.

"Papa, it is time to get up; Mr. Podmore is waiting for you. Papa!"

Still no reply came. How sound asleep he was, to be sure! she had never known him sleep so heavily before. And how tiresome that he had locked the door!

Perhaps she might get in through the dressing-room. Yes, the dressing-room door was unlocked, sure enough, and she went round to the other door communicating with the bedroom.

But when she tried it, she found this one fastened also.

“Papa!” she repeated, tapping rather more softly than the last time, for she remembered that this door was almost close to the head of the bed, “are you not going to get up this morning? It is past ten o’clock, and Mr. Podmore——Papa, papa!” and, suddenly losing all compunction about startling him, she knocked as loudly as she was able. But still no sound from within.

A terrible fear seized her; fear of what, she could not have said, but such fear as caused her heart in one instant to double its pulsations, and made her limbs nearly give way under her. She beat at the door with all her strength, shaking and rattling it, and crying “Papa, papa!” as though she had all at once gone frantic. But no one answered, and, with a thrill of terror such as she had never felt in her life before, she rushed from the door and flew half way downstairs, calling out wildly: “Mr. Podmore!”

The appeal was so loud that Mr. Podmore heard immediately, and came into the hall looking very much startled.

“What is the matter?”

The question seemed somehow to bring Emmy back to her senses. The necessity of explaining her fears to another person made them look so ridiculous that she felt almost ashamed of them. What could Mr. Podmore think of her for being so silly?

“It is very foolish of me—I beg your pardon, I’m sure. But—but I cannot make papa hear—he is sleeping so soundly, I suppose—and I don’t know why, but for a moment I got almost afraid—Oh! don’t trouble to come up.”

But Mr. Podmore, taking no notice of these last words, began to come up instantly. There was another rush of fear through Emmy’s heart. Was he afraid too then?

“It was so very foolish of me,” she said, forcing a smile as she turned back on her way upstairs again, with the lawyer close behind—“I am really quite ashamed. The very idea of being frightened about such a thing, you know! Papa dear, here is Mr. Podmore.” And again she tapped at the bedroom door. But still there was no answer, no answer even when the summons was supplemented by a smart rap from the lawyer’s cane.

"Is he a heavy sleeper usually?" inquired Mr. Podmore thoughtfully.

"Not usually," said Emmy, trembling very much; "no, he sleeps rather lightly in a general way, but he went to bed so late last night, you see. It is really very awkward to know what to do, is it not?" and again she forced a little smile.

Mr. Podmore, however, seemed to feel the annoyance of the dilemma more than its absurdity, for he did not relax a muscle of his face, only smote upon the door again, harder than before. But all within continued silent.

"Was there anything—anything peculiar about him last night?" the lawyer asked after a brief pause. "Did he seem at all in low spirits?"

"Oh! Mr. Podmore, what do you mean?" said Emmy, trembling more than ever; and then, as she remembered how strange and flighty her father's manner had been, she grew cold with vague apprehension. "He was a little nervous and out of sorts perhaps, but what with one thing and another—and mamma being away too—that is enough to make us feel dull, of course."

“He cannot have heard the news, surely?”

“The news! what news?” cried Emmy almost with a shriek. “Oh! is it anything about mamma—anything about——”

“No, no, nothing about your mamma, don’t be frightened for that. It is about this Beacon Bay branch—the shareholders held a meeting yesterday, and vetoed the project over the heads of the Directors; the land is not worth the amount it is mortgaged for. But he cannot have heard anything about it yet, I should think, has he?”

Emmy stood almost paralysed with consternation. Nor was it the prospect of poverty that dismayed her so, though she knew enough of her father’s affairs to understand that the failure of the scheme for the Beacon Bay railway meant ruin utter and hopeless. But, crushing as such a reverse would have been to her under ordinary circumstances, she hardly felt it now; she thought of the news only in connection with her father, and in the light of that terrible question of the lawyer’s as to his spirits on the previous evening—a question which seemed to open up a very abyss of dread possibilities. Oh! could it be

that——But no, the more she reflected the more she was convinced that, whatever causes of anxiety and harassment might have weighed on her father's mind last night, the knowledge of this new and final calamity was not among them; had he not expressly said that as regarded money matters everything was going well?

"I am sure he has not heard——quite sure. Oh! how can you frighten me so? I tell you he sat up very late last night, so no wonder——Papa, papa, papa!"

She knocked at the door again with frenzied impatience. But the result was still the same.

"We must have it broken open," declared Mr. Podmore.

"Broken open!" cried Emmy. "Oh! surely ——" She paused half choking. Had it actually come to breaking open the door? And yet, extreme as the measure seemed, she could not say that it was unnecessary.

"He may have been taken with some slight illness, you know," said Mr. Podmore soothingly. "If you will wait a moment I will go and call the servants. Don't be afraid; I dare say it is nothing of consequence."

He ran downstairs quickly. Emmy leaned against the rail of the landing and waited; she could not have moved or even stood upright without support. Oh! what did it all mean? or was it only a dream?

"Here, bring a chisel or hammer or something," she heard Mr. Podmore's voice say. "Make haste—there is something wrong upstairs—make haste!"

Emmy quivered in every limb. Something wrong! how undoubtingly he said it—something wrong! And he had just told her not to be frightened.

There was a confused noise from below as of many footsteps, and then Mr. Podmore spoke again.

"Stop, run for the doctor one of you—Dr. Plummer. He is close by, that's one good thing; his carriage was standing at Mr. Brown's as I came along. Run, tell him to come directly."

The doctor! Emmy grew faint and dizzy as she heard. What was the doctor to do? But to be sure if it really was a case of slight illness——

The footsteps began to ascend the stairs.

Emmy looked, and saw first Mr. Podmore coming up, and one of the men-servants following with a hammer and chisel, and next the cook drying her hands hastily on her apron, and then the two housemaids, and the lady's-maid, and the kitchen-maid—the whole household down to the very knife-boy—all trooping up to see and hear. What did they mean by it? They thought then that something very serious was the matter?

“Had you not better go downstairs, Miss Waters?” said Mr. Podmore as he came up, and he spoke more kindly than she had ever heard him. But she answered “No” almost rudely.

They all came crowding on to the landing. Emmy had been standing a little way from the bedroom door, and found herself almost shut out from a view of it by so many pressing round. But she did not make her way to the front again, for the simple reason that for the time all strength and energy seemed to have deserted her; so she remained in the back-ground, leaning against the rail and listening.

“You had better drive it in there—just above the lock,” she heard Mr. Podmore say.

"Just here, sir?"

"Yes."

And then came a heavy crashing blow, the sound of which made Emmy's blood tingle down to the very finger-tips, while almost in the same instant she looked up with a wild flash of hope and eager expectation. Surely, surely he must hear this.

But no, all was silent in the room, and presently the blow was repeated, and Emmy quailed as though it had been dealt upon herself. Still no sign of movement within.

For some minutes this went on—one blow after another (sharp ringing blows that seemed to vibrate through the staircase and the whole house)—the cracking and creaking of resisting timber—the clash and clang of metal—and in the intervals dead silence. What with that noise and that silence, Emmy felt as though she must go mad.

"Isn't it beginning to give a little now?" said Mr. Podmore at last, and the sound of his voice came almost as a relief.

"Just a little, sir, but it's wonderful firm. If we could but set to work in two places at once, that would do it directly, I think."

"Go and get another chisel then—or an axe or something. We must have it open somehow."

"I'll go and see what there is, sir. The wood-chopper, perhaps."

Somebody went downstairs, and there was a momentary silence—how grim and death-like that silence was! But hardly had the echo of the descending footsteps ceased when other footsteps were heard mounting—heavy slow-treading footsteps that sounded like those of a person in authority, Emmy looked, and saw a large stout figure coming upstairs, which she immediately recognised as that of Dr. Plummer.

"Dear me! dear me! this is very bad," said the doctor lugubriously, as, wheezing somewhat, he reached the level of the landing. "And you have not got the door open yet, I see."

"No, not yet. I am so glad you have come," said Mr. Podmore warmly, and nevertheless Mr. Podmore was not a man wont to find any amount of responsibility too much for him.

"Oh! of course I made all the haste I could when I heard—And this has been quite sudden, has it? He did not seem at all poorly yesterday?"

The question was not addressed to Emmy, who, standing behind everybody else, was out of the way of observation. But Emmy heard, and felt an icy chill in all her veins. What did the man speak of as "this?"

"Not as I know of," said the cook, dropping a curtsey—"leastways not to be laid up. But he has been looking dreadful pale and gashly like two or three days back, and it was only last night I see a winding-sheet in the candle and thought to myself——"

"Pooh, pooh, that's neither here nor there. Did anything special occur in the course of yesterday to excite him, Podmore, do you know?"

"I can't say about anything special, but of course the general state——Well, is that the chopper? Bring it here."

"I think we shall do it now, sir."

"Lay it underneath—so—and then give a wrench as I drive in the chisel. Now!"

A loud shivering crash—louder than anything that had gone before. Emmy felt herself growing absolutely rigid with the extremity of her suspense, and she fixed her eyes on the upper

panels of the door—it was all she could see of it for the intervening press of bystanders—with a gaze that was almost vacant.

“It is coming now, sir. Once more, please.”

Another crash, louder still this time—a sound of creaking hinges—and then instead of the panels there was a dark space, faintly illumined by a dim ray of lamp-light. Emmy had a singular sensation of dreamy surprise. Why should it be night in there when it was daylight everywhere else?

There was a general move in front of her; everybody was going forward into the room. Emmy followed automatically; her past terrors had half stupefied her, and as she passed into that strangely lighted chamber, where the yellow glow of the lamp mingled spectrally with a grey glimmer of daylight that struggled in between the closed curtains, everything looked so unreal that she scarcely knew whether she was in the waking world at all.

Suddenly she caught sight of a figure sitting at a table in the middle of the room, and felt a thrill of indescribable relief. Why, so there was her father after all.

Probably she uttered some slight cry or exclamation, for somebody just then looked round—it was one of the housemaids—and, instantly getting between her and the table, took her by the arm and attempted to turn her back.

“No, miss dear, no—better not. Come downstairs with me—I’ll take care of you. Come, miss dear.”

But Emmy extricated herself angrily, and, pushing past the speaker, made a step forward which brought her once more in view of the table. There sat her father, his face propped on one hand, a letter in the other, his eyes turned towards her——

Why did she not go up to him?

Why? Ah! because she saw that those eyes which stared at her so fixedly were the glazed eyes of a dead man.

She had never looked on death before, and yet, seeing it now, she recognised it at once. She stood still for an instant, then tottered, and, losing her balance, dropped into the ready arms of the good-natured housemaid. But, giddy and half fainting though she was, she had still strength left to resist all the girl’s kindly efforts to lead her from the room.

Meanwhile Mr. Podmore and the doctor, too much engrossed to take notice of Emmy's presence in that dimly lighted room, or indeed to remember her existence at all, had gone up to the table, and stood contemplating the rigid form that sat there so grimly and immovably.

"Quite cold, I suppose?" said Mr. Podmore presently in a low voice—so low as to be almost a whisper.

"Oh! quite," returned the doctor, and his voice was as subdued as the other's had been. "It must have been several hours ago."

"And—and how do you think it was?" asked Mr. Podmore again, and he looked round with a glance that was almost timid. "The room seems in great confusion."

"Oh! but I believe it has been quite natural. I have seen for a long time back that there was something wrong with the heart; I am not at all surprised."

"I don't see anything like a glass or phial certainly," said Mr. Podmore, with another nervous glance round, "but still it is so strange—— That letter—it seems as if he had been writing something to leave behind him. We had better look, had we not?"

"I think we had," said the doctor. "Will you do it then?"

"Very well, as you wish it. The evidence may be very important."

With something of a shudder Mr. Podmore put out his hand, and took hold of a corner of the letter that drooped down from the dead man's fingers. The tenacity with which those fingers had closed round it must have relaxed somewhat just before the last, for they offered hardly any resistance to the attempted withdrawal of the paper, and the lawyer found himself almost at once in possession of what he wanted.

Just then some one drew back the window curtains, and a flood of chill grey light was let in upon the scene, overpowering the rays of the lamp, and instantly bringing into cold hard bare relief the ghastly outlines which they had softened. The effect was inexpressibly dreary.

"Let me see," muttered Mr. Podmore, drawing near the window. "'My dear Harry'—who can that be, I wonder?—'if you will do me the favour'—'cashing the inclosed draft'—why, what's this about? And the date is nineteen years ago."

"Here is the envelope, sir, I think," said one of the servants, and picked something up from the floor as he spoke.

"Give it here. 'Harold Maxwell, Esq.' Harold Maxwell—why, that was—and then the date—yes, everything shows—Why, what do you think—that forgery—he did it himself after all."

"I can hardly think so," said the doctor, who was still standing by the table. "The more I look the more I should judge it to have been quite natural."

"No, no, I don't mean that. No, that forgery—don't you remember?—what that young fellow Maxwell got in to trouble about—old Mr. Waters made sure he was the one, and so did I. Well, now it seems that all the time——"

He stopped, interrupted by a feeble cry from the other end of the room. He looked round; there was a commotion among the women servants, and somewhat to his consternation he saw that they had gathered round the drooping figure of Emmy, who lay apparently senseless in the arms of one of them.

"How! Miss Waters here! What do you

mean by allowing——What is the matter, Plummer? has she fainted?"

But Emmy had not fainted; it would have been almost better for her if she had. Her bodily powers had given way, but in the midst of their collapse she had consciousness enough to retain distinct recollection of the lawyer's words, and to comprehend the terrible charge against her father which they embodied; yes, and not only to comprehend, but to believe. Like lightning there flashed through her mind the memory of a thousand little circumstances—some that had passed almost unnoticed at the time, some that had surprised and perplexed her as altogether unintelligible—which now, in the sudden light thus cast on them, arranged themselves at once as parts of a consistent and coherent whole. Her mother's infinite love and gratitude to the man who in the world's eyes had been the disgrace and well-nigh ruin of the family—Miss Egerton's abrupt change of feeling in his favour—the agitation shown on the subject by her father—all came back upon her now, and gave to those few broken phrases of Mr. Podmore's a horrible significance which

seemed to set her brain on fire. The very anguish of the discovery kept her stunned faculties awake, and she understood everything—understood that all the reprobation she had ever bestowed by word or thought on her uncle Harold belonged not to him but to her father, the father whom she had loved so, whom she had been so proud of—ah! how proud she had been of him! And now—only to think——

“Carry her to her own room immediately,” she heard the doctor’s voice say. “It is not fit for her to be here; she ought not to have been allowed to come at all.”

What! did they want to take her away from him—from her own father—did they think she would desert him just because——Ah! but if they all turned round to despise and revile him, she would only love him the more.

She made a violent effort, and, breaking furiously away from the astonished bystanders, rushed forward to the place where that stolid figure still sat mute and motionless. For one instant she paused with something of shrinking as she saw the white face and staring eyes so familiar and yet so strange, but in the next

her love had triumphed over every other feeling, and, throwing her arms round the form that had once been her father's, she pressed her warm lips against those cold ones over and over again in a passion of grief and despairing tenderness.

It was long before they could disengage her from that to which she clung so fondly, and when at last they did she had fainted in very truth.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Last of Uncle Gilbert's Money.

THERE was bitter grief and passionate lamentation that day at the Laurels, the grief and lamentation of a widow and orphan for one who, whatever might have been his errors, had ever made a loving husband and father.

For Emmy was not left long to be the only mourner. Mrs. Waters, anxious to return as soon as possible, had started alone from Southampton that very morning, and reached home a few hours later, to find her husband no more, and his guilt proclaimed to all the world by his own deed.

It may be supposed how terrible a blow was dealt to her by the tidings—so terrible indeed it was that for some time her own life appeared to tremble in the balance. With all his faults her

husband had always remained in her eyes the lover of her youth, the friend and companion of her later years, made all the dearer to her by the fierce furnace of affliction through which they had passed together ; and, losing him, it seemed as though part of herself were taken from her. And then the sorrow of bereavement was further embittered by the consciousness that the catastrophe which he so dreaded—the catastrophe which he had died in a guilty attempt to avert—had, in consequence of that very attempt, actually taken place, and that his memory was branded as a criminal's in the eyes of all who had known him, in the eyes of his own child—there was the worst of all. That Emmy should know—Emmy who had held her head so high, who had been so proud of her father and her father's family and all connected with him—and that now she should find out that his was the crime the supposed author of which she had so mercilessly judged—ah ! what could she think ?

Poor Emmy ! the discovery did indeed cost her many a sharp pang of silent anguish. And yet, harrowing as it was to her to know the

secret of her father's shame, the knowledge nowise diminished the filial love and tenderness with which she thought of him. Did she not remember that she was guilty too?

The days passed, and the effects of the shock on the bereaved wife were so far softened that the apprehensions at first felt on her account gradually became allayed. It was probably well for her and her daughter also that at this time they were forced to think of something else than their grief by the necessity of breaking up their household, and leaving for ever the sumptuous new abode which had witnessed alike their greatest glories and their bitterest sorrows. The funeral was scarcely over when this task was imposed upon them, for the owners of the Laurels could not be expected to let them live there rent-free, and it was ascertained that the remaining available means which Austin had left behind would barely suffice to pay his creditors ten shillings in the pound. Mrs. Waters and Emmy were utterly and absolutely destitute, without a farthing in the world to call their own.

Happily for them they had friends who in this extremity would not see them cast out upon

the world without a home. They were in fact offered a home yet more magnificent than that from which they had been driven, receiving a pressing invitation from Olivia to fix their quarters at Egerton Park; she had abandoned all idea of giving up Egerton Park now. But they knew that Olivia was at this time busy with renewed preparations for her marriage with Mr. Graham—or rather with Harold Maxwell; for he was at liberty now to bear his own name, which was indeed for the present quite the most popular in all Chorcombe. It is true that she was willing to delay those preparations somewhat for their sakes, but they did not choose to intrude the presence of mourners into a house which ought to be given up to rejoicing. Another home had therefore to be sought for them, and as they would not accept any but a very humble one, they were ultimately established, by the joint assistance of Olivia and her betrothed, in a little house in the village street, not far from that in which they had lived before, and in no degree better or more comfortable; and yet, mean as it was, they deemed themselves fortunate in securing it.

So they crept back to the old place, how sadly and sorrowfully need not be said.

They had spent dreary days in that street before, but they had always had then something brighter to look forward to, while now there appeared no possibility of better things, and the very faculty of hope seemed to be extinguished in both mother and daughter. For Emmy had lost all trace of natural youthful elasticity, and was if possible more depressed, more utterly cast down and crushed, even than Mrs. Waters herself. The memory of her fault and its consequences weighed upon her constantly, repressing all her characteristic buoyancy of spirit and humbling her to the very dust, and this notwithstanding that she had made full confession to her mother and received full forgiveness. It was something to be forgiven by her mother, but she could not so easily forgive herself.

With Emmy thus prostrated it may be imagined how dismal their new home must have looked, especially as it was almost entirely uncheered by any communication with the outer world. During the first days of their bereavement their seclusion was so absolute that they

hardly crossed the threshold of their dwelling, and admitted no visits save only those of their own near relation, Harold Maxwell, and Olivia Egerton as his affianced wife. Emmy had through her mother asked and obtained pardon from them also, or she could not have endured their kindness. And in a very short time even the solace of those visits ceased; for one morning, within four or five weeks of the memorable journey to Southampton, Harold Maxwell and Olivia Egerton were married, and went away for a tour on the Continent.

The wedding was very quiet, in consideration of the feelings of poor Austin's wife and daughter, for whose sake both bride and bridegroom wished to escape the demonstrations with which the good people of Chorcombe would otherwise have celebrated the occasion. But unimposing as were the external adjuncts of the ceremony, the knot was tied as firmly as though a train of a dozen bridesmaids had been present at the tying, and the newly made husband and wife were content, whoever else may have found fault.

Emmy and her mother had been prepared to

feel the absence of those two kind friends and comforters very keenly, and so for a time they did, though after the first day or two hardly so much as they had expected. The fact was that just at this juncture an old acquaintanceship was renewed by which it came to pass that other visits were substituted for those which were temporarily dropped.

This renewal of acquaintanceship took place in the following wise.

The mother and daughter were coming out of church on the first Sunday after the departure of Harold and his wife—it was the first Sunday also on which the mourners had brought themselves to appear in church, or indeed in any place where they must confront the prying eyes which they felt would be upon them—when Emmy, through the folds of her thick crape veil, caught a glimpse of a manly well-built figure a few steps in front of her standing quite still just within the doorway, as though waiting for some one. She started violently, and looked round to her mother as it for protection, for though the face was not just then turned towards her she knew—how she

could not have said, yet nevertheless she did know in a moment—that the figure was that of John Thwaites. But Mrs. Waters was some paces behind, having stopped to speak to a poor woman to whom she had been kind in other days, and who now had intercepted her with some sincere, if ill-timed, expressions of sympathy. There were already two or three groups between her mother and herself, so that it was impossible to turn back without great awkwardness, and Emmy resolved to go forward and wait outside; if she passed quickly enough perhaps he would not notice her.

She hurried on therefore as fast as the throng in front permitted, with lowered eyes and averted head, yet all the while inwardly palpitating with a thousand old memories of the past which that glimpse had brought back. The last time she had seen John Thwaites standing in that doorway, not much less than a year ago now, he had been waiting for her—waiting for her in point of fact at least, though nominally for her father and mother—for in those days he had been wont to walk home with the family from church almost as a matter of course. But since

the rise in their fortunes he had never been asked to accompany them, and had never offered; so that, as his place was in the choir gallery, immediately above where Emmy sat, they had scarcely so much as seen each other on Sundays lately—not even at a distance. And only to think of his standing in that doorway again, waiting for somebody, but not for her—ah! who could it be for? Only to think of passing him and never being so much as noticed by him, for she had passed him now, had she not? Yes, she had passed out of the building altogether.

“Miss Waters,” she heard a voice just behind her say.

Ah! how well she knew that voice! its tones seemed to vibrate through her so that she hardly knew what to do for trembling. She stopped—she could not have gone forward even if she would—and turned slightly round, not daring, however, to raise her eyes in spite of the veil that sheltered her.

“I beg your pardon for stopping you,” the voice went on, and it quivered as though with some strange agitation, “but—but—but——” here the speaker paused, apparently to seek

some available excuse—"But it is so long since I saw you, you know."

"Yes, very long," muttered Emmy, half choking, but she felt absolutely compelled to say something.

"And—and I did not like—I was afraid you might think it a liberty—if—if I called without asking leave. Would you consider it an intrusion if—if sometimes—just to pay my respects——"

There was a sob from under the veil; if her life had depended on it, she could not have kept that sob down.

"Oh! how kind you are! how kind!" and the veil was not so thick but that he could see the tears streaming down her face as the words broke from her. "After all that has—Ah! how kind you are!"

Her voice was stifled by another sob, and, fearful of giving way altogether in view of the whole departing congregation, she muffled her face in her veil, and turned it hastily away.

He saw what she was afraid of, and did not seek to detain her, only put out his hand and held hers for an instant, saying:

“I will wish you good-bye then just for the present. And oh! Miss Emmy, if you only knew——”

He broke off, and, giving her hand a lingering pressure which seemed to take away all abruptness from the sudden conclusion, turned on his heel and was presently lost to sight among the bystanders. Emmy had to muffle up her face closer than ever, but in spite of her tears she felt in her heart the first ray of comfort that had penetrated there for weeks. She could never expect to be entirely forgiven, of course, but still only to hear him say such kind words——When her mother rejoined her a few moments afterwards she found her hardly able to speak for weeping, and yet as they walked home together Mrs. Waters might have noticed, if she had looked for it, a certain firmness and elasticity in the girl's step which showed that going out that morning had done her good.

John Thwaites was not long in making use of the implied permission thus received. The very next afternoon he found his way into the little parlour, the counterpart of that in which he had spent so many pleasant hours; and,

though the first visit was necessarily more or less a painful one, it was yet so welcome to both mother and daughter that, when he asked leave to repeat it soon, he again found ready assent. And he did repeat it soon—very soon—repeated it time after time, so often and at such short intervals that neighbours began to gossip on the subject, and to say to each other as they saw him come up the street that they supposed it was quite an understood thing now. And gradually—but not for some little time after the neighbours had begun to make their remarks, for she had grown much more diffident than she used to be—gradually a certain vague hope formed itself in Emmy's mind; could it be that he was going to forgive her altogether? Ah! but then he did not know the full extent of her fault—when he did—and the hope became dashed with fear again.

At last a day came when all doubts were decided—a day when, finding her for a few minutes alone, he asked her in so many words if she would be his wife. She could not say no, and yet for a while she would not say yes; not however from any remaining leaven of the old co-

quettish spirit, but because she insisted on first confessing to him, with many a tear and sob and painful flushing of the cheek, all that she had once done to forfeit her own esteem and his. But when he had heard he only repeated his question yet again, with words of love and devotion even more tender than before, and this time she did not delay her answer.

The neighbours might gossip now as confidently as they pleased; it was an understood thing in very truth.

For three or four months even after this, Emmy and her mother still clung to their poor home in the village street without any outward change in their way of life, not choosing that any such should be made till at least half a year had elapsed since the death of the husband and father whom they mourned so tenderly; they would fain have made the period of probation even longer, but John Thwaites's importunities were too much for them. About the end of that time therefore they began to prepare for removal from that humble dwelling, which they were about to exchange for a larger and more commodious one—not so sumptuous indeed as

the Laurels, to say nothing of Chorcombe Lodge, but still infinitely preferable to the mean little cottage which they were leaving. This new abode was a trim little white house in the outskirts of the town, which John Thwaites had taken and begun to furnish. Begun to furnish, it has been said, for his operations were suspended at a very early stage by a letter received from Nidbourne, where Mr. and Mrs. Harold Maxwell, just returned from the Continent, were spending a few weeks before coming to settle down finally at Egerton Park, and whence they now wrote announcing that they had given orders for the furnishing of their niece's future home at their own expense.

Nor did their kindness to the young couple stop even here. A day or two before that fixed for the wedding, they came back from Nidbourne—we may be sure that their visit there had not been without profit to the poor fisherman and his wife whose misfortunes had contributed so much to bring about their new-found happiness—hastening their return in order to be present at the ceremony, and indeed to take a part in it. For from whose hands should

John Thwaites receive his bride but from those of her uncle?—that uncle whom she now loved and honoured as much as ever she had once reprobated him. And when everything was over there was slipped into Emmy's hand, as a joint gift from her uncle and aunt, a tiny purse, which tiny as it was turned out to contain such a sum in bank-notes as would keep her handsomely supplied with pin-money for an indefinite number of years. So that the poor little bride did not go to her husband quite portionless after all, though indeed it would not have made any difference in her welcome if she had.

Some years have now passed since the last of the above recorded events took place ; so many that, in the trim white house which is, and has been ever since, the happy home of John Thwaites with his wife and his wife's mother, there are now some four or five other inmates, little rosy-cheeked curly-headed creatures, with pattering feet and merry voices that make music in the ears of their elders—rather too loud music perhaps sometimes. What with these permanent additions to the household, and the atten-

dants whom their presence renders necessary, the house is getting too small for the family requirements, and a move is even now in contemplation to another larger and more convenient, and also more suitable to Mr. Thwaites's present position as one of the greatest employers of labour in or near Chorcombe.

For John Thwaites is now a principal partner in the concern of which he was formerly manager, and has prospered so well that, if he cared for living there, Chorcombe Lodge itself would scarcely be beyond his means—only that, after standing tenantless and neglected for a great many years, it has been recently bought up cheap by the Guardians of the Chorcombe Union for their new workhouse. So John is building a new house for himself—after a somewhat less ambitious design, certainly, but still promising to be quite one of the best in the neighbourhood—on a piece of ground which he has bought close to Egerton Park. This proximity to Egerton Park will prove an immense saving of time and trouble in more than one quarter, the communication between the Thwaites family and that at the great house being very

constant. Indeed there is hardly a fine day on which some of the rosy-cheeked curly-headed little people aforesaid do not find their way up to Egerton Park to join certain other little people whom they find there, as rosy-cheeked and curly-headed as themselves, in a game of romps under the trees.

It need scarcely be said that the intercourse between the two families is by no means restricted to those merry gatherings of the children. Olivia and Emmy are almost like sisters in their intimacy, or would be at least only that, Emmy's mother being Olivia's sister in downright earnest, the fact of their being aunt and niece is necessarily more kept in view than the few years' difference in their ages would seem to warrant. Then between the heads of the two households, Harold Maxwell and John Thwaites, there is the strongest bond of reciprocal respect and good-will ; and although one is more a man of letters, and one more a man of business than the other, each takes sufficient interest in his friend's pursuits to make their meetings as mutually pleasant as they are frequent. And their meetings are very frequent, the members of each

family indeed feeling themselves nearly as much at home in the one house as in the other.

There is only a single occasion in the whole year when visitors at Egerton Park may not make almost sure of meeting Emmy and her husband and mother, and that is one evening about Christmas time, when Olivia, who has a strong dislike to anything like avowed family feuds, makes a point of asking the Clare Court people to dinner. The Clare Court people include Randal and his wife, the widow of a deceased leather merchant, whom he married a year or two after the final annihilation of his hopes in another quarter, and whose property has completely relieved the family from all financial embarrassment—a circumstance of which she is supposed to take considerable advantage in all matrimonial differences of opinion, which scandal says not unfrequently occur.

It may be understood why Emmy is not invited to meet these guests, but it must be added that the fact of Olivia's bringing herself to entertain them is the most emphatic proof that she could possibly give of her wish to set an example of family harmony. Indeed the sight of

Randal Egerton is to Olivia almost as painful as it would be to Emmy herself, reminding her as it does of a danger which she once escaped so narrowly that she can never recall it without a shudder, mingled with a very disagreeable sense of shame and humiliation.

“Ah! Harry,” she said to her husband at the conclusion of the latest of these annual penances, “when I see that man, and think how near—you know what it was I was so near, Harry—when I think of it all, I wonder how you can ever have come to forgive me.”

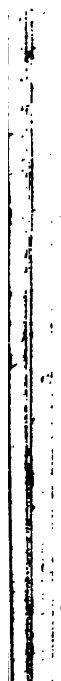
“My sweet one,” he answered, drawing her fondly towards him—for the two are as lover-like with each other in word and deed as ever they used to be—“how can you say such things? As if you did not know that all the need of forgiveness was on my side—or do you want to make me humble by reminding me?”

“On your side! Oh! Harry, Harry! No, it was on mine—all on mine. The fault was with the one who first doubted the other, and you never doubted me, but I——”

He interrupted the flow of her self-reproaches with a kiss.

“My own impetuous darling!” and he could not forbear smiling at her vehemence. “Very well, we will not quarrel about it; we will say it was nobody’s fault if you like. And now, my Olivia, we will not talk of those things any more; they were part of an evil that is over and ought to be forgotten—part of the curse of Uncle Gilbert’s money.”

THE END.



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